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As the season changed, the distance between Mafuyu and me shrunk bit by bit.

Our feelings were within reach, capable of being grasped with our outstretched hands.

I knew, because of our body warmth. And because of the pulsations, and our breaths.

I wanted to convey to her,
my feelings that I couldn't put into words.





神楽坂
響子

Kyouko
Kagurazaka

「これで、私ときみの間にあった、
友情、信頼——そういった常温感情はみんな燃え尽きた。
哀しいことだけれど、しかたない」

"With this, the friendship and trust that once existed between us—
our normal friendship—will burn and disappear into nothingness. It's

a shame, but it can't be helped."



"How can I possibly return the content to you? That's my treasure, you know!? You should at least understand that much, you idiot!"



"Well then, did you find it? Your real desire."

My heartfelt desire.

"..... I don't know."

"I have already found mine."



However, our thoughts did not take shape.
Instead, they slowly fluttered downwards and piled up on the soil,

accumulating deeply and coldly in whiteness.

Winter is coming.

Our final winter is approaching—

Chapter 1 - The Way to Sing, The Way to Open the Door

That winter was the very first time in my life I had racked my brain over what present I should get for a girl.

It was morning in the practice room of the Folk Music Research Club. Even though only Chiaki and I were inside, there was barely any space remaining in the room because of the drum set and the amplifiers. The air outside was chilling to the bones, but inside the room, it was really warm.

"The other two girls should be here soon, right?"—I thought to myself, as I stared at the bundled short hair swaying in-between the cymbals. There was no way I could ask Mafuyu—whom I was getting the present for—for ideas; and I had no intention of consulting Senpai either, as it would've definitely piqued her interest.

But when I finally decided to discuss the issue with Chiaki, she asked me this question instead: "Haa? Present?" And threw a punch in my direction.

"What was that for....."

I rubbed my head gingerly as I picked up my fallen bass.

"What's the present for? Come on, tell me again."

Asked Chiaki, as she blew puffs at her fist. Who would have the guts to answer you when you're acting like that? But I was forced to answer, as Chiaki's gaze was becoming sharper and sharper. I stuttered,

"Well, as I was saying, Mafuyu's birthday is coming up soon....."

Another blow. Just as I expected.

"Unbelievable! You shouldn't be approaching me about that if there's even an ounce of sensitivity inside you!"

"Eh? But..... I mean, I do know Chiaki's preferences are vastly different from Mafuyu's, but I have no idea who else I can talk to

about this."

"That's not what I meant!"

The third blow. I was already getting dizzy. Chiaki gave a "hmmph" and began to tune the snare drum. I let out a sigh and plugged my bass into the amplifiers. What's going on here? Did I say something to piss her off?

"Geez! Nao, stop thinking about pointless things like that and let's begin our practice! Time is precious, you know?"

"I get it....." Guess I'll put the issue of the present aside for now. It was rare for Chiaki to come to school early together with me.

I slung the guitar strap over my shoulder and gripped the neck of my bass tightly. Remnants of the heat from back then still lingered on the strings; and I could even feel the sweat that had flowed from my fingertips at that time being absorbed by my palms.

A week had passed since that storm-like school festival had ended. It was winter now, so it was harder to wake up early; but that didn't stop me from attending morning practice. Because, during the live performance, I had realized just how poor my physical endurance really was.

I barely made it through the two-hour-long nonstop performance on both Saturday and Sunday. And despite having braced myself for the ordeal going in, I guess my emotions were running high because of that strange incident; the entire time, my body was moving against my will, as though it was under the influence of some strange drug. But on the second day, after we had finished our encore—and after my brain had already been drained of the drug—the student council barged backstage and said to Senpai,

"Kagurazaka, there's a whole bunch of people outside who wanted to watch your performance but couldn't get in. Can you guys hold another performance during the kouyasai?"^[1]

To which Senpai readily agreed. Can you imagine just how pitiful it must be when the wax of a candle has completely melted away, and all that remains is the candlewick flickering faintly?

"Right, Nao's back did look really pitiful during the kouyasai." Seems like Chiaki remembers as well. As she tuned the bass drum,

she continued, "But Senpai was really happy though. She said you sounded like Springsteen."

"Though I turned into Mori Shinichi later on....."^[2]

"All the more reason for you to practice!"

Seems like Chiaki's still angry about the issue of the present. She repeatedly stepped on the pedal of the bass drum, and as the bass notes gradually gained rhythm, they interweaved with the beats of the floor tom and transformed into a solid sixteen-beat tempo. The door's still open for ventilation, you know..... Oh well, she's restraining the volume anyway.

I sighed to myself silently—keeping the volume low while drumming continuously was an incredibly difficult feat. Chiaki was becoming more and more impressive, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being left behind.

"Nao's singing sounded a little forced. Perhaps it was because you were playing the bass at the same time. It used to be much more straightforward."

"That's some memory you got there....." She even remembers how I used to sing?

"How long do you think I've been taking music lessons with you?"

"You're right."

Chiaki and I had been classmates for the past ten years. Quite unbelievable, come to think of it. And ten years later, we even joined the same band.

"That's why you have to practice more, to get your fingers accustomed to it. Your singing should become more natural once that happens."

I see. Come to think of it, she's actually drumming and chatting at the same time. Is that also because her hands have gotten used to it after repeated practice?

"Urm, where should I begin our practice? Which phrase?"

"How should I know? Don't depend on me for things like that!"

She was right. I regretted it the moment I asked her. Chiaki puffed her cheeks out, and all the while, her limbs never stopped their task

of sketching out the tempo.

"Even I can't know every single thing about Nao."

"Then how much do you know?"

I almost fell forward when a sudden voice came from behind me. When I turned around, my nose almost came into contact with the maroon-colored hair. A pair of sapphire eyes appeared right before me, and I froze on the spot as I stared intently at Mafuyu's face. Her nose and cheeks were slightly red, probably because she was walking to school in the cold winter morning air. How long has she been here? I didn't notice her presence earlier because of the continuous beats of the drums; and Chiaki hadn't seen her either, as her view of Mafuyu was being blocked by my body. Chiaki then stopped her arms with a surprised expression on her face.

"Geez, give us a greeting if you're here already! Morning, Mafu-Mafu!" exclaimed Chiaki, as she lifted her drumsticks in the air.

"..... Morning." Mafuyu shifted her gaze away from me in embarrassment. I did the same as well—my heart was pounding just from briefly crossing sights with her.

That was because—it had only been a week since our live performance at the school festival.

"It's not a good habit to eavesdrop," voiced Chiaki.

"I was not!" Mafuyu shook her head hard, her hair dancing about in the air. "..... It was by accident!"

"H-How much of our conversation did you hear?" I was panicking. Did she hear about the present as well? Mafuyu frowned.

"..... Is there something you want to hide from me?"

"Eh? Ah, no, well....."

"I heard you and Chiaki talking about how you two have been attending music lessons together for years."

Thank goodness. So she only heard our conversation from then onwards.

"Why are you heaving a sigh of relief?"

Mafuyu's question caused my mind to go into panic mode once

more. Why is she angry?

"Urm, what?"

"You're always like this, Nao. Your thoughts are always clearly reflected on your face," said Chiaki behind me.

"I-Is that true?"

"You never noticed?"

Mafuyu dealt me a heavy blow when she said that. Chiaki then gave a shrug.

"How could he possibly notice? He's so dense, he wouldn't even realize if he was stung by a bee."

"That much I know."

"Even amoebas possess more nerves than he does."

"That, I know too."

What the hell did I do!?

"Earlier on, he even asked me about Mafuyu's pre-" "Whoaaa!" I stepped over the drums and pressed my hands on Chiaki's mouth. Please don't say that out loud!

"Uhhuhhhh!"

"What? Is there something I must not know?"

When I turned around, the expression on Mafuyu's face looked as though she wanted to interrogate me. Being forced into a corner with nowhere to run, I could only flap my arms about like a dying moth as I tried to come up with something that would satisfy her.

"Morning, my fellow comrades!"

Came a booming voice. A tall silhouette appeared at the opened door. Kagurazaka-senpai leisurely strode into the practice room, with her braided black hair fluttering in the air, then closed the heavy door. I was saved. She might not have known what she was walking into, but I was in a really bad situation.

"Hmm? Young man's about to kiss Comrade Aihara, so Comrade Ebisawa's trying to stop him?"

"No way!" "Not at all!" "Kyouko!"

Senpai removed her guitar case from her shoulder and placed it on the floor, then opened the door with a smile.

"In order to not interrupt you three, I'll just leave the camcorder running and stay outside for about five minutes. Please continue what you were doing."

"Hold on, hold on! What the heck did you come here for? Let's begin our morning practice! You know, the morning practice!?"

I tried my hardest to get her to stay.

"You need to practice kissing in the morning? I never expected you to be such an innocent guy. I see, I am willing to help you out."

"Why is Senpai thinking in that direction!? We're a band, are we not!?"

Senpai turned around and closed the door, then lifted her index finger.

"We're no ordinary band, yeah? We're the *blackbirds* <feketérigó>, burning through the night with the flames of love, and ours wings will declare to the world the advent of dawn."

"Okay....." And so?

"If we ever become popular one day, and someone requests that we take part in a movie shoot, wouldn't it be problematic if we couldn't get the kissing scene right?"

"Why are you worrying about such pointless things?"

"As a side note, Comrade Ebisawa's pretty impressive when it comes to kissing," Senpai licked her lips.

"Kyouko~!" Mafuyu shrieked and slammed her fists down on the cymbals next to her. I was surprised by what Senpai said. W-When did that happen!? Ah, no wait, could she be talking about what happened on the third day of our training camp?

"Geez! Music's our main focus!" Chiaki poked Senpai with the tip of her drumstick. "We should concentrate on trying to hold more live performances so we can become famous!"

"The reason I love Comrade Aihara so much is because you always say the right things at the most crucial moment!"

"That trick of yours will only work twice a month at most!"

"What if I throw in a hug and a kiss?"

"Hmm..... make it three times then."

What's with that conversation? Senpai walked past me with a smile and opened her guitar case. Her Les Paul was giving off a black luster.

"I'm happy to see that everyone's flame is still burning. I thought young man was already burned to a crisp, and that it would take you a while for you recover. But it looks like you've steeled your heart already."

Senpai flashed me a smile as she tightened her strings in a sultry manner.

"You will show me an unknown world in our next performance, and the many ones after that, right?"

"We have already found our next performance?"

Asked Mafuyu, as she quickly swung her head around. That was way beyond what I had expected. It looked like she was getting more and more into the live performances.

"No, not yet. I want to hold one more performance before the end of the year, but I wish to aim higher. I have no intention of staying in the same spot."

"An even bigger stage?" asked Chiaki.

"That's right. Somewhere we'll receive no support from the audience."

Kagurazaka-senpai was someone that refused to remain in the same spot forever—she always aimed higher and higher. How far has she set her sights? And can I really keep up with her pace?

"No worries."

Senpai smiled as she briefly looked at the small country we were in.

"Even if we're stuck, we should be able to move forward as long as our hearts continue to beat in rhythm. Just like what young man did for Comrade Ebisawa back then."

A clattering sound rang out behind me. I turned around and saw Mafuyu picking up the fallen chairs and amplifiers. She stole a glance at me; but her face became even redder, so she shifted her gaze away. I quickly turned my head towards my bass's amplifiers.

I played quite a few notes wrong during that morning practice—because I had noticed Mafuyu staring at me hesitantly through the corners of my eyes. Needless to say, my singing didn't sound natural at all.



I couldn't get Mafuyu's gaze out of my mind, even during class.

Ever since that incident—

The distance between us had shrunk.

I had no idea by how much, but I was scared—scared that it was all just my wishful thinking. After the kouyasai had ended, Mafuyu had collapsed from exhaustion while she was packing things up, so I carried her to the infirmary. As there was no one else around in the infirmary at the time, I was left with no choice but to look after her (though all I did was to sit on the chair next to the bed). That hour was a great opportunity for me, but I screwed it up by only talking to her about music. What the hell was I doing?

"That's right. What the hell were you doing, Nao?"

"You should've made a move on her back then! We thought you two were going to return hand in hand. What a huge disappointment that was."

The guys in my class surrounded me and blasted me with insults. That happened in the changing room after we were done with physical education, the fourth lesson of the day.

"Urm, sorry....." No wait, why am I apologizing?

"But you did do something there, right?" "It's impossible for nothing to happen, right?"

"Urm..... Ah, right. Mafuyu hates Italian operas, just like me."

"Who the hell wants to know that?" "Just be a music critic for the rest of your life!" "Damn it, is that thing between your legs a dud?"

Why am I being scolded by everyone I meet today? I really felt like crying.

"Nothing else? Like a date or something?"

"Urm....."

My classmates closed in on me like a pack of hungry wolves ready to pounce on a sheep, so I finally revealed to them my intention to celebrate Mafuyu's birthday with her. In an instant, everyone's eyes flared up like pumpkins on Halloween. Whoa!

"What are you getting her, Nao?"

Why must I answer that question?

"I-I-It should be a ring first, right?" "That's way too fast, calm down! He should give her a choker as his first present." "You should be the one calming down!" "How many months of salary do you have to burn to buy a choker?" "Not for the Princess, silly. It's for Nao!" "That's a good one!"

"No, well..... Sorry to interrupt while you guys are passionately discussing the matter..... but I haven't decided yet."

"Just die already, you indecisive bastard!" "It better end in tragedy!"

I shrunk my body and leaned in close to the lockers. I wanted to hide somewhere. Please don't talk about this matter anymore. I had no idea why the guys were lashing out at me. For some reason unknown to me, everyone had assumed that Mafuyu and I were already in that sort of relationship. When did I ever say that?

"Her birthday is less than two weeks away, right? You better make up your mind quickly, Nao."

"Mmm..... Wait, why do you guys know when her birthday is?"

"Are you an idiot!? It's obvious we would check up on the birthday of a girl in the limelight!"

"High school's a long period of time. You never know what'll happen."

"Though it has all happened to Nao already."

"Damn it, I'm pissed. You should just die, Nao." It's not my fault!

"You can't even decide on a gift, even when you're surrounded by girls."

"Mmm. I tried discussing it with Chiaki, but she rejected me."

I could sense everyone's fury.

"You tried discussing it with Aihara?" "About Princess's present?"
"Are you for real?"

I shivered and nodded. In the next moment, I was being beaten on the floor. "This is for Aihara! And this is for me!" said one of the guys, as he punched me twice in my stomach. The rest of the guys followed suit.

The dust danced in the air that was mixed with the smell of sweat and deodorant. I was alone in the room—my body, immobile, because of the pain emanating from all the injuries on my body. The only thing I could do was lie on my back and listen to the bell signaling the end of lunch break, ringing in a place faraway.



Human beings are creatures that will reflect on what they've done wrong—so that very night, I spent my time in my room thinking about why Chiaki and the guys were angry. We had been around each other for over ten years, but I still didn't really know her that well. And that became even more apparent after we joined the band. I mean, we do know each other quite well if we're talking about typical things, like birthdays.

Hmm. Birthday. Is that it? It's highly possible she was angry because of that. Right, I'll get her a present that's suitable for her then. Will that be okay? I wonder how late I am. I checked the calendar on the desk and counted.

Urm.....—it was way too late.

But I guess it's still better than nothing. Yup.

My mind circled around that thought for heaven knows how long.

After finally making up my mind, I quietly walked downstairs. Tetsurou was listening to Bach's Christmas Oratorio on full blast in the living room. I carefully snuck past the corridor and opened the

cabinet to pull out a record that was kept inside, then wrapped it up with blue wrapping paper from the department store.

"Will she be happy with this?"—I naively thought to myself. Looking back, I was really hopeless back then.

The next day, while I was waiting for the first train, I saw Chiaki on the platform, so I ran over to her to hand her the present. Chiaki's eyes opened wide when she received the present from me. Her gaze wandered back and forth between me and the present about four times. She then asked,

"What's this?"

"Urm, I'm ten months early, but it's your birthday present."

"Haa?"

"This is the vinyl record of <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>, the UK version. You've wanted this for a very long time, right?"

"Eh? W-W-Why? And normally, wouldn't you say it's two months late?"

Chiaki's face alternated between red and white; and her eyes widened for a brief moment, then started blinking repeatedly for a while. What a busy person she is.

"Why? You've never given me a birthday present before."

"Weren't you angry yesterday because of this?"

Her beet red face froze for a moment. And in the next instant—

"You moron—!"

The scenery before my eyes flipped upside down at the same time I heard her furious roar; and a violent impact greeted my back before I could even figure out what was going on.

The unbelievably blue winter sky suddenly appeared before me, though half of it was hidden behind the shelter of the train station. Pain shot through my head, and my back was arching upwards because of the spasm. When I realized I had been thrown by Chiaki, she popped her head out above me.

"U-Unbelievable! I never expected you to be as stupid as this!"

In response to Chiaki's stomping attacks, I shielded my head with my arms and rolled about on the floor.

"S-Sorry. Urm, I never expected you to be this angry."

Seems like I've made a critical mistake. It took me a great deal of effort to finally get up. Chiaki was hugging the record tightly in front of her chest, and was staring at me fiercely as her shoulders heaved up and down in conjunction with her breathing. Thank heavens no one else is on the platform in the wee hours of the morning—it would've been bad if anyone had witnessed that incident.

"Moreover, you should know that the gramophone in my house is broken."

Come to think of it, it's just as she says. I had visited her house several times to play, but had forgotten about that already.

"I'm sorry, I'll take it back....."

"Idiot!"

Chiaki slapped my hand away and hid the record behind her.

"I'm keeping this since you're giving it to me!" So do you want it or not? What on earth do you want?

Just then, the first train arrived at the station, so I quickly stepped behind the white line. The back of my head was assaulted by the blaring horns.

"You should think about my feelings as well!"

Yelled Chiaki, with a voice comparable to the sound of the train. Her face was flushed red, and her tied-up bundle of hair was flapping against her ears because of the wind. I didn't step onto the train when the door opened, because Chiaki was giving off an overbearing aura.

"Stupid Nao, you should just die!"

Chiaki's voice was then cut off by the closing doors of the train. I could see the silhouette of her body through the windows; and as it moved further and further away from me, I caught a glimpse of a glitter in the corners of her eyes.

Was she crying?

I squat down on the platform and tried my hardest to recall her expressions and her voice as I waited for the next train to arrive.



The frequency of the trains was really low, so missing the first train meant I would arrive at school around twenty minutes late.

When I finally reached the school, the main gates were already closed, so I entered through a side door instead. "It'll be awkward when I bump into Chiaki"—as I turned past the corner of a building while thinking that, I heard a faint drumming sound.

It was coming from the old, low-rise music block that was huddled under the shadows of the tall school buildings. There was a person squatting against the door of the room located furthest away from the buildings. Her long maroon hair almost brushed against the ground. It was Mafuyu. What is she doing there?

"..... Morning."

Mafuyu greeted me softly by lifting her eyes to look at me. She hugged her guitar in her bosom.

"Morning....."

I stopped about three steps away from Mafuyu. Why is she waiting outside? Isn't Chiaki in there? We averted our gazes right after we made eye contact with each other. This had been happening ever since the school festival.

Is there something you should be telling me?

It felt like Mafuyu was asking me that from the corners of her eyes, but neither of us could touch on that matter. It was the same that morning as well. Instead, I just asked an ordinary question.

"Urm..... Chiaki should be inside, so why are you out here?"

Mafuyu stared at me intently, then heaved a deliberate sigh. A stinging sense of guilt and sadness became stuck in my throat. She lowered her head and allowed her words to fall in-between her knees.

"Chiaki is angry, so I am waiting for her to cool down."

"S-She's angry? Did she say anything to you?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"It is obvious from the sounds. The strength in the upbeats have disappeared. This sort of uninteresting cadence always emerges whenever Chiaki is angry or anxious."

I was speechless. Can she glean that much just from the sound of the drums?

"You never noticed? You are really dense....."

Mafuyu shot a look of resignation in my direction. Okay, I am dense, but that's another thing altogether, okay?

"Did something happen? You were acting strange yesterday as well."

Mafuyu slowly stood up and moved her face towards mine.

"No, nothing. Urm....."

Chiaki's anger began when I wanted to discuss Mafuyu's birthday present with her, so it should be more or less related to Mafuyu as well, right? But now's not the time for me to say such a thing.

"Explain it to me properly."

"Urm, you see, uhh....."

"Why are you always like this?"

Mafuyu's voice and gaze stabbed deeply and painfully into my heart.

"If you do not tell me properly..... I..... I am....." Mafuyu's furious voice became softer and softer as her gaze slid down my body."..... still waiting for you."

Waiting for me? Waiting for what?

No, of course she's waiting for my words. B-But I'm not mentally prepared yet, and the present isn't ready either. So now isn't—

"Forget it. I get it." Mafuyu lifted her lowered head all of a sudden. "I will ask Chiaki."

"Y-You can't!"

Mafuyu was shocked by my voice; and even I was surprised as well. She pressed her back against the door.

"Urm, I mean, well, urm, I made Chiaki angry..... probably. So I'll think of something and apologize to her."

That's right, it has to be me who speaks. It was the same for Mafuyu's present as well. All in all, asking for Chiaki's assistance was a mistake. I had to think about it and decide myself.

And so, I pushed Mafuyu aside and grabbed the handle of the door.

"Nao! You're so freaking late! I told you before that it'd be faster to run to school if you missed the first train, didn't I!?"

A furious roar came pouncing at me the moment I opened the door. Thank goodness, it's the usual Chiaki—I heaved a sigh of relief for some reason. That was really shameful of me.

Notes

1. Kouyasai (後夜祭) is the event held at night on the last day of a festival, usually involving dancing near/around bonfires and other events
2. [Afamous enka singer](#)

Chapter 2 - Fingers, Jeff Beck, Theme Park

"So, how are things going between you and Mafuyu right now?"

Yuri raised his voice in an attempt to make himself audible over the noise of the crowded live house. Despite the fact that we were in the middle of a break, it was still pretty noisy because of the heated discussions of the audience and the tuning of the stereo systems.

"Lots of things happened during the live performance at the school festival, isn't that right?"

Sitting opposite of me was a young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes..... or not—he was actually a young male violinist. He stretched his body towards me and moved his face close to mine. A turtleneck sweater, paired with a matching red short coat, and a pair of denim shorts and over-the-knee socks. Mmm, that attire is perfectly fine for a guy..... No wait, that's not right, yeah? I pressed my palm against my forehead and sighed, then asked,

"Look, why are you here, Yuri?"

There was a really interesting performance Sunday afternoon, so I went down to the live house Bright by myself. And there, I bumped into this guy.

"Shouldn't you be busy with the recordings and rehearsals? Your performance is coming up soon."

"Do you hate seeing me?"

Don't hold my hands tightly and look at me with those teary eyes of yours when you ask me that, okay? It was really attention-grabbing. Shit, this'll invite misunderstandings.

"H-How can that be? I'm really glad I met you here."

Yuri's face brightened up in an instant.

"Thank goodness, I really wanted to see Naomi again as well. Tomo mailed me telling me Naomi's favorite live performance would

be taking place today, so there was a high chance you would be here."

DJ Tomo? When did he and Yuri get on such good terms with each other?

"I blame it all on Naomi. You refuse to call me because you and Mafuyu are doing very well together."

"N-No, e-eh?" How much does he know?

"I have heard lots of things from Mafuyu, but I am not telling you what I heard."

Oh right, this guy here is recording his next album together with Mafuyu, so he might actually be spending more time with her than I am. Though it was a bit unexpected that Mafuyu would tell Yuri all those things.

"It's not like things are all smooth sailing."

"But both of you confessed to each other already, did you not?"

"N-No?" Both of us?

"You never asked Mafuyu about her feelings?"

"Mmm....."

Yuri was rendered speechless for a while.

But that was really the case.

I briefly came into contact with Mafuyu's heart during the school festival; and I had a feeling she was staying by my side for the exact same reason I was staying by hers. But that was all there was to it. After that, we became tongue-tied whenever we saw each other's faces.

"Look, Naomi. I really hope you can understand how painful it is for me to hear Mafuyu talk about you happily."

"H-Hmm?" Happily? That Mafuyu?

"I will steal her away from you if you do not become decisive any time soon, you know?"

Yuri rested his elbows on the table and brought his face even closer. My head was in a fluster when he said that with that tiny mouth of his at such a close distance away from me. I backed away

unconsciously.

Even if you ask me to be decisive..... (come to think of it, what's he even referring to?) I had no idea what Mafuyu's answer would be, so I didn't dare ask the question.

Yuri slumped onto the table all of a sudden and began kicking his legs about. He seemed frustrated.

"..... What's wrong with you?"

"I am about to die, thanks to Naomi's indecisiveness."

So you can kill someone with your indecisiveness—now that's something new. While I was thinking that, Yuri suddenly stood up and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Actually, it is really simple. All you have to do is this."

W-What?

"I love you. I want Naomi's everything."

"Who the hell can say that? I'm not French!"

Wait, did he just say Naomi? Was it just a mistake on my part?

"Most of the Japanese are braver than Naomi!"

"What are you two doing here?"

A voice suddenly came from behind us. I turned around and saw the stout silhouette of someone with a green baseball cap on his head and a beaten-up leather coat slung over his shoulder. It was DJ Tomo.

"I never expected Yuri and Nao to be here. You two get along really well."

What was even more surprising though, was the person that appeared behind Tomo. He was wearing a fierce expression on his face, and his long hair was being covered up by a bandanna—it was the guitarist Furukawa Taisei. Both of them were Kagurazaka-senpai's friends, and also regulars at Bright. So they actually knew each other too—what a small world this is.

"Tomo!" Yuri jumped from his seat and hugged the tanned DJ. "Thank you for the ticket!"

"No biggie, I ask for nothing in return. Well, aside from you

spending a night with me." You do know Yuri's gender, right?

"So you're here as well."

Said Furukawa, as he sat down next to me, clamping the guitar that was originally on his back between his knees.

"Are you performing later, Furukawa?" I asked timidly. He's not here as part of the audience, is he? I'm really not good with dealing with him, and you're asking me to watch the performance together with him? Please spare me from that.

"They asked me to help with the six o'clock performance." I heaved a sigh of relief when I heard that from Furukawa.

"Taisei knows Nao too?" Tomo sat down next to Yuri.

"I told you already, didn't I? I performed with Kyouko's band."

Furukawa's temper was short, as usual.

"Who's she? Is she replacing you as the bassist?"

Yuri tilted his head in response to Furukawa pointing at him. Whenever we met, Furukawa would always ask me to quit as feketerigó's bassist.

"That girl looks to be a better player than you are, and she's much more striking visually."

"Do I look like a bassist?" Yuri's eyes were glittering.

"It's obvious looking at your fingers. You play either the guitar or the bass, yeah?"

Impressive. He deduced that just by looking at his fingers. But he hasn't figured out Yuri's actual gender, right? Idiot. I retorted him in my mind as a tiny sense of superiority crept up inside me.

"Me taking over Naomi's position? What a good idea. I had never thought of that."

"No no no, what are you talking about?" You'll be busy with work, right?

"If you quit and have her join the band, I'll introduce you guys to a producer," said Furukawa. Hey, Yuri, why do you have such a gleeful expression on your face?

"U-Urm, Furukawa, you've got it all wrong. This person here's a

violinist, an old friend of Mafuyu's."

"I know how to play the guitar too! And I can learn the bass if I want to."

Don't interrupt, Yuri! Things will just get even more confusing!

"And since I am the one that taught Mafuyu how to play the guitar, our timbres should match really well."

Furukawa frowned.

"You taught that girl?"

Yuri nodded lightly as he cowered in his seat in fear. What's wrong, Furukawa? That look of yours is really scary.

"Who did you learn the guitar from?"

"No one..... Urm, I learned by watching videos of Jeff Beck and stuff."

"It'd be best if you and that girl relearned the correct fingering technique."

Said Furukawa, as he pressed his fingertip against Yuri's nose. Yuri was shocked speechless. Tomo and I interrupted Furukawa at the same time.

"H-Hey, Taisei, what's wrong?"

"Is there something wrong with Mafuyu's fingering technique?"

"I told you before"—Furukawa shot a fierce glance at me—"there'll be no future for her with her current style of playing. She's placing too much stress on her wrist."

Now that he mentions it, Furukawa did say something along that line after our live performance back in summer.

"What d-do you mean by 'placing too much stress'?" I unconsciously pushed my elbows down on the table and stretched my body over it. Mafuyu might've been able to move her right hand already, but I was still worried.

"She's using her wrists to forcibly strum the strings at high speeds to compensate for the lack of strength in her fingers. It's surprising that she managed to play through the whole performance like that."

"Eh? Ah, no, but, her fingers can move now."

Oh? Furukawa lifted his eyebrow.

"Then it's none of my business..... It just pisses me off when I see that silly fingering technique of hers. You should put some effort into learning before you teach others, yeah?" His fierce gaze shifted from me to Yuri. Yuri flinched and grabbed my arm in fear.

"Why don't you teach Yuri then?" joked Tomo.

"Do I look like I have the time to do that!?"

"Yuri's not in a band, right? How about performing together with me next time? Taisei and I will be forming a band for our next live performance. You interested in joining us on the stage? You can get Taisei to teach you at the studio."

"Hey, Tomo, don't go deciding things like that on your own for the sake of your own desires!" Furukawa gave Tomo a hard kick beneath the table.

"But this person here's really talented at guitar. Taisei, you'll be in charge of teaching him the correct guitar technique, while I'll be in charge of teaching him techniques in bed." I gave Tomo a kick as well.

"When is the next performance?" Hey, Yuri! You don't have to be that enthusiastic about it!

"The twenty-fourth, next month. The event is called 'Snow Crash.' And since it's on Christmas Eve, we'll be holding the performance in a spacious venue that can accommodate five hundred people."

"Christmas Eve huh....."

Yuri knitted his eyebrows.

"I am probably scheduled to attend a party somewhere, but I will skip it since I am not interested."

"The event will start at noon, but we'll be left alone at night. You know, to make use of the opportunity to get all intimate and stuff."

"Mmm, I see. But I do not think I will have the time to make it down to the studio. Sorry."

"But of course! Don't take his words literally, man!" Furukawa snapped.

"What a pity. I found a song that would make even Yuri burn. It's a Christmas song by a French composer. Urm, forgot his name. Ho-Hon—"

"Honegger?"

Said Yuri and I at the same time. We turned our heads to look at each other.

"Yeah, him."

A Christmas song. Then it was most likely <Une Cantate de Noël>, his last work. It was a very dramatic cantata, but was barely known in Japan. I'm surprised he found that. Yuri's legs were swinging about beneath the table.

"Wow! I wanna listen!"

Honegger was a well-known composer outside of Japan because his music appeared in many movies. Looks like Tomo has been hooked on classical music ever since I asked him to help me edit the piano concerto and violin concerto. Playing Honegger's piece on Christmas Eve at a live house—now I'm interested as well.

"So you knew about Honegger as well, Naomi? That is impressive. I was really sad since I never heard Mafuyu mention him. I thought he was not well known in Japan."

"It can't be helped. Mafuyu's interests lie in the works from East Germany."

But it was true that Honegger wasn't very well known in Japan.

"Isn't that nice? I never thought I would get to listen to Honegger's works live here. I am really interested in seeing how you will arrange it."

"It shouldn't be a problem for you if you attend the concert as an audience member, yeah? I'll give you a ticket."

"Mmm, I will try to free up my schedule....."

"Yuri's really lucky," I thought to myself in envy.

A music concert on Christmas Eve.

Isn't that just perfect?

No wait. Wouldn't that be too straightforward? My intentions would

be clear for all to see. But isn't that okay? I mean, that's what I intended to do this whole time, isn't it? What is there to be afraid of at a time like this?

Filtering out the noise of the live house, I sank deep into thought. I regained my senses only after someone had slapped me on the cheeks.

"Naomi? What's wrong?"

Unbeknownst to me, Yuri had gotten up and sat down next to me. His palms and that cute face of his appeared right before my eyes, and I almost fell backwards and slipped out of my chair. Eh? Strange? Where's Furukawa?

"Taisei's about to hit the stage, so he already went in"—Tomo put on an exasperated expression—"It's about time for me to go move the instruments as well, so you two enjoy yourselves."

"Ah, h-hold on a second, Tomo."

I leapt out of my chair and dashed towards the tall and tanned DJ. The baseball cap turned around.

"About the Christmas concert—do you guys sell advance tickets? I'd like to buy two."

Tomo tilted his head.

"We do. Are you coming with Yuri? I'll have to charge you for the tickets."

"N-Nah, that's not it."

I could feel Yuri gazing at my face when I was about to blurt out my intentions, causing me to become flustered.

"I'll pay for two tickets. Not with Yuri, but with someone else."

"Ahh, I see. Another girl? Nao's a real flirt."

"I think so too. Naomi should practice some abstinence."

"Yuri, you won't find any happiness with a guy as useless as him. You should find someone better."

"But you know, encounters are just like traffic accidents—they cannot be helped. I have no one to blame but myself for bumping into a dummy like Naomi."

All I want to do is buy two tickets—why are they talking about me like this? I felt like crying.

"Who will you invite? Mafuyu?"

Yuri moved his face next to mine and whispered that into my ears. I couldn't bring myself to look at him straight in the eyes, so I directed my gaze at the stage and nodded. I'll give her Honegger's record as her birthday present—I should be able to find one in Tetsurou's collection—and with that, I'll have an excuse to ask her out on Christmas Eve. Though I'm not sure she's going to agree to go.

Just then, Yuri stomped my foot hard.

"What the heck are you doing!?"

"You do not need to reveal all that right to my face, do you? You should consider my feelings as well!"

"You're the one that wanted me to decide as quickly as possible—Oww, that hurts!" He actually drilled his heel into my foot!

"Yeah, I did say that!"—Yuri was throwing a tantrum like a child—"but I never expected you to get tickets for a concert on Christmas Eve! That is so unlike Naomi!"

"Well sorry for that! Then again, I'm not sure if she would be willing to go with me....."

"How can she possibly decline!?"

"I-Is that so?"

"The live concert will end at five, so you'll be going on a date after that? Are you planning to head down to Disneyland? God damn it, who's the girl? Can't be Kyouko, right?" asked Tomo.

"If it were me, I wouldn't be interested in Disneyland; I'd head straight to the hotel instead," said Kagurazaka-senpai.

—Wait a second. Ehhhhhhhhhh!?

A tall silhouette suddenly appeared behind Tomo's gigantic body. She was wearing a miniskirt that generously revealed the curves of her legs, despite it being the end of November (though, admittedly, it was cashmere); and her belly button could be faintly seen in-between her knitted jacket and the miniskirt. Additionally, her hair

wasn't braided like it usually was, and instead, flowed naturally down her back, which made her look even more mature than usual.

"Sen..... pai? Why are you here?"

"Why? I'm here to attend the concert, since Taisei and Tomo are performing. What a coincidence. I would've invited you if I had known you were attending as well. Then again....."

Kagurazaka-senpai moved in towards me and hooked my arm with a sensual smile on her face. I couldn't run away despite the shock I was experiencing.

"This coincidence further confirms the invisible bonds that exist between us. I'm really happy."

"Eh? H-Haa, no, wait."

My mind was a mess. I couldn't even shake away Senpai's hand that was softly caressing my chin.

"You could've told me yesterday you were coming down. I could've given you a lift here."

"Tomo's car is filled with musical instruments, isn't it? I'm not interested in being squished by the sampler and mixer while riding along the idyllic roads."

"No worries, I've tidied up the boot recently to make space in the co-driver's seat for Kyouko."

"And whenever Tomo drives past a hotel, you always ask me things like 'Which do you prefer—a rest, or an overnight stay?' and so on. That's sexual harassment, you know? I've already decided to sit only by the side of the one I love."

Senpai hugged my arm tightly as she carried on her crazy conversation with Tomo.

"No, but not too long ago, this guy here said he'd be spending Christmas Eve with another girl—"

"Oh right. I hope you'll clear this up for me." Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders and turned me to face her.

"Urm, well."

Why does she want to know? Senpai burned my eyes with that

passionate gaze coming from her slightly teary eyes; and I had no option but to turn my head to seek assistance.

"..... Naomi is a real flirt."

Muttered Yuri, as he hid closely behind me. What the heck!? Why are you saying that as well?

Just then, the force that was being applied on my shoulders by Senpai's hands suddenly disappeared.

Senpai snapped her head to the side, and her eyes opened wide as she gazed past my shoulders, looking at the area behind me. It seemed like Senpai had only just noticed Yuri's presence—probably, in no small part, because of the loud noise of the live house, as well as Yuri's small stature.

"Julien Flaubert?"

That name flowed out from Senpai's lips. I was completely suppressed by her aura, so I just turned my body aside. After crossing sights with Senpai, Yuri nodded his head in confusion.

One step. Two. Senpai moved in towards Yuri. I thought she was going to grab him by the hands, but instead, she cupped his tiny face—something I hadn't really expected. Hey! I shouted in my mind, but couldn't say anything out loud, as the two of them were enveloped in some weird, strange-colored atmosphere. The noise around us seemed to die down in an instant.

"There's a saying that goes, '二度あることは三度ある'. I heard it's derived from a French saying. Is that true?" ^[1]

I could hear Senpai very clearly despite her soft murmuring. What's the point of asking that all of a sudden?

Yuri's face turned burning red as he blinked in response.

"Jamais deux sans trois." ^[2]

He replied softly in French.

"Mmm. One year ago, I thought I would never be attracted to another guy for the rest of my life, and certainly never thought my second would appear before me so easily."

For some unknown reason, Senpai was looking at me when she said that; but she quickly turned back to Yuri.

"And I never would've expected my third to come so soon."

"Huh?" Yuri blinked his large, shiny eyes repeatedly. "I do not quite understand what you mean. I am not very good with Japanese."



"That is to say, this is my declaration of love."

I tugged the back of Senpai's collar on reflex. "What do you think

you're saying to someone you just met?"

"The opposing nation is a strong one, and our nation is weak when it comes to scoring points. So as a representative of Japan, I think it's best I go all out right from the very beginning."

"What does that even mean? And please don't declare yourself as our representative! You'd be the disgrace of Japan, so stop that!"

"Urm, but I have two people in my heart already," said Yuri.

"That's okay. I have three—though it has just increased to four."

Said Senpai gently, as she combed her fingers through Yuri's silky blonde hair.

"But wouldn't it make you look dishonest if that number kept increasing?"

"I'm not adding to it on a whim. I'd be being dishonest to myself if I didn't admit I was attracted to you. And a person like that could never be honest to others as well."

What, you guys are actually striking up a conversation just like that? That's unbelievable. Playing the tsukkomi by myself was no longer enough, so I turned my head around to seek help from Tomo. But the tanned DJ had somehow disappeared. I looked around in a fluster, but when I located him on stage, he was vigorously waving his baseball cap in the dark, saying, "Do your best!" Damn that bastard, he snuck away and left me alone by myself!

"I think it would be better if you directed half your enthusiasm to Naomi as well."

Yuri flashed me a mischievous smile while in Senpai's arms.

"You're right, I agree. Young man..... ah—"

"What?"

"I'll be affording you half my enthusiasm."

Why can I do nothing but drop my jaw and stand here agape? I couldn't say anything despite being aware of that thought of mine. It had almost been a year since I had met Senpai, and in that time, I had learned quite a number of things about her. Acting on that previous knowledge, I quickly grabbed Yuri by the shoulders and pulled him away from her.

"Are you jealous, Naomi?"

"Don't you start talking rubbish as well!"

"We should be the ones that are jealous, isn't that right?"

Senpai slid herself behind Yuri and whispered that.

"That is right. So that means we are enemies."

How do the two of them manage to converse normally? I really don't get it. You two might as well go on and on forever. While Yuri was turning around to look Senpai in the eye once more, the spotlights of the live house suddenly became extinguished; and all that was left, were the bluish-white spots of the disco ball dancing across the audience.

Before I knew it, my feet were already soaking in the deep and heavy discord of the synthesized strings, and the water levels were rising higher and higher. My arms, my chest, my neck—my whole body was being engulfed by the strings of the dark live house. The stage lasers were flashing on stage, and the crowd was going wild. The guitarist's and the vocalist's silhouettes were projected against the darkness, like the shadows of thunderclouds. But despite the cheers and the crazy drumming, I could clearly hear Yuri's words to Senpai.

"—My enemy, may I know your name?"

As well as Senpai's reply.

"Kagurazaka Kyouko—the revolutionary of love."

Notes

1. I think if you are to put it literally, it's something along the lines of 'a third incident will follow after the second one'.
2. I think it means 'never two without three' literally.

Chapter 3 - Cabbage, Chocolate Parfait, Santa Claus

Before returning home, I briefly attended the celebration party to casually ask Tomo about the price of the tickets for the Christmas concert. Four thousand yen each. That's expensive—about the cost of a professional concert. Tomo explained, "Can't be helped, the venue is large, and it's a really stylish event. I'm already giving you an eighty percent discount." Yuri, who was standing next to me, was actually surprised at how cheap the tickets were. I guess tickets to the concert of a famous classical musician are in a totally different league.

Kagurazaka-senpai, who was competing with Furukawa in a drinking game, ran up to me all of a sudden and asked, "What's with all this talk about Christmas or whatever?"; and I quickly ended the conversation in response. Yuri seemed to be pretty interested in all the liquor, so I pulled him out of the bar and we set out on our way home.

"Well then, I will not pray for your success, but I will still support you anyway. Do your best."

Said Yuri, as he entered the car that had come to pick him up.

"What you mean by that?"

"What I mean is, I will pray that you will be harshly rejected by Mafuyu when you ask her out. You will then run to me in tears, and I will do my best to console you."

While I pondered a response with my jaw opened wide, the door of the car shut tight and the vehicle drove away.

When I returned home, I was exhausted, and was not in the mood to prepare dinner. Instead, I went straight to the garage. Coughing because of all the dust, I tried my hardest to find the records I wanted—records of Arthur Honegger's symphony **<Pacific 231>** and the ensemble **<Une Cantate de Noël>**. Found them. Now I'm done with the first present.

Back in my room, I mulled over Yuri's words several times as I flipped through the cashbook in my hand. It was possible that Mafuyu would reject my invitation, but Yuri did say *"How can she possibly decline!?"* Should I believe him?

I'll never know if I don't properly confirm it with Mafuyu.

But there were plenty of things I had to do before that.

I wanted to attend the live concert that month, but because I had spent an inordinate amount of cash to purchase my bass, my monthly pocket money was already considered spent. And on top of that, I knew our household finances were already running really tight.

When I left my room and headed down the stairs, I was greeted by Rodolfo's theme from *<La bohème>*. The music had just reached the scene in the opera where the broke poet was forced to burn his manuscripts for warmth, as he was too poor to afford coal. I heaved a sigh in front of our living room door. Whenever royalties came in late, Tetsurou would always put that song on at full blast.

"Eight thousand~~~!?" That was what my dad Tetsurou said while lying down on the sofa in an uncouth manner. He cocked his eyebrows and said unhappily, "Look, you've got quite the guts to ask for that despite knowing our household's financial situation. Both my pocket money and yours was reduced by a substantial amount so we could cover our daily expenses, isn't that right? Eight thousand yen is a huge sum of money! Huge!"

"I know, but....." My voice became tinier and tinier. In the past few months, Tetsurou hadn't taken up any jobs because he was lacking motivation; and if we factored in the fact that the royalties we were due hadn't been paid to us yet, we were in a really tight situation.

"Do you know how hard it is to earn eight thousand yen? You do know how petty the people in my circle are, don't you? Money just disappears in a flash! Just a day ago, the cabaret club I went to was charging eight thousand..... wait wait wait don't flash that knife at me Nao! I'm lying I'm lying! I didn't go to no cabaret!"

"You'll be revealed sooner or later anyway, so why are you wasting all our cash in secret?"

"Nah, I just thought: if I top off the cash with what I win from horse

racing, Nao will never notice."

"Horse racing!? You just said horse racing!? Despite the amount you squandered last time, you tried it again!?"

"Whoaaa! No wait! Urm, you heard wrong—I was talking about the gay bar!"^[1]

"Enough with those lame lies, that's not an excuse! Speaking of which, you haven't accepted any jobs recently. Why did you reject the requests to advertise the promotions?"

"I still have the pride of a critic in me! And moreover, I do belong to the educated class as well!"

"As someone who goes around snooping for news about Yuri, you have no right to say that about yourself!"

"Ah, speaking of which, did you get me Yuri's three sizes like I requested?"

"He's a guy, damn it! And what good would knowing that information do you?"

"You're really silly, Nao. In a highly capitalistic society with differing values, what you need is all sorts of information. And the only ones that can make full use of those opportunities, are the industry's ruffians, like me!"

So where did your critic's pride fly off to?

"In any case, the opportunity hasn't shown itself yet, so it's impossible for me to give you more pocket money. How about we cut down on the cash we spend on our meals?"

"I've already been doing that. I've used all the culinary techniques in my repertoire on cabbage for the past two weeks."

"Wow, I didn't even notice. Come to think of it, those meals were indeed all cabbage—just what you'd expect from Nao. No wonder Mika, Arisa, Rena and Aoi told me, 'You've slimmed down quite a bit, Tetsurou!'."

"How many cabaret clubs did you visit, you damn bastard!?"

"I'm sorry, I really am!"

While the bustling theme of Café Momus played over the

speakers, Tetsurou squirmed his way around the sofa and desk, trying to escape.

"O-Oh, Nao. I just thought of a way to fix our financial problems!"

"..... And that is?" I heaved a sigh and asked him that while chasing him in-between the television and the decorative plants.

"We can borrow some cash from Misako."

"Do you any pride as a man!?"

"Ha ha ha! If I had that, I wouldn't have gotten married, or filed for a divorce, or even fathered Nao!"

That's nothing to be proud of. And can you stop wearing that smile of yours that says "you'll have to thank me for that"?

"Moreover, what'll be your excuse when you ask her for money?"

"Well..... calling her will be Nao's job."

"What!? Don't screw around with me!"

"But Misako refuses to speak to me! It has been like that since half a year before our divorce. Come to think of it, I lost a family member when that happened....."

"And you're about to lose another one this very moment."

"Don't leave me alone, Nao!"

Don't hug me, you're irritating. I sent Tetsurou flying with a kick and made my way to the phone—not to call Misako, obviously. I had no idea how rotten my father was, but I at least, had a man's pride. I made a call to the publisher. The magazine's editorial department wasn't like your typical company—despite it being ten o'clock on a Saturday night, someone was around to receive the call. After informing the person that I was Hikawa Tetsurou's son, I began rambling on about how I had used cabbage to make two weeks' worth of meals; and when I reached Friday's meal, which consisted of cabbage rolls with cabbage filling, the man on the other end of the phone (whom I guessed was the chief editor) let out a painful cry and said tearfully, "I'll definitely send you the money by Monday!" before hanging up on me.

"..... Nao, you'd be just fine even if I wasn't around, isn't that right?"

"Are you insured, Tetsurou?"

"Sorry, it's Daddy's fault. I'll give you the eight thousand yen, so don't be angry."

It wasn't my intention to threaten you, but thank goodness—though everything may be for naught, depending on Mafuyu's answer.

"But Ebisawa Mafuyu should be under a strict curfew, right? Ebichiri's a worrywart after all."

"Eh? W-What are you talking about?" I was flustered by Tetsurou's words.

"And isn't eight thousand yen a little too expensive? I do know some cheaper hotels, you know?"

"What the heck are you talking about!?"



It wasn't until noon on Monday that I was able to mention the Christmas event to Mafuyu.

I had actually planned to casually touch on it during our morning practice, but the promise from the editorial department had only been verbal. So in order to avoid the embarrassing situation of not having the cash to purchase the tickets after Mafuyu had agreed to go, I actually snuck out of school during lunch break to check our bank account. And it was only after I had confirmed that the royalties had been deposited that I returned back to school.

"Nao, where did you go? I finished my side dishes already!"

Chiaki pointed at me with her chopsticks while holding her lunchbox in her other hand. When I passed her my bento, she immediately opened the lid and peered at the contents inside.

"Look look! This may look like fried chicken, but it's actually cabbage! Isn't that impressive?"

Chiaki showed my bento to Mafuyu and the other girls at the table beside me. No, this is nothing to be proud of, so please don't go showing it around.

"Nao has always been good at things like this—like turning tofu into mock burger patties. I've always wanted to eat this again."

Said Chiaki, as she narrowed her eyes into slits. Mafuyu's gaze moved back and forth between the bento and my face. Terada and the rest of the girls then walked over, and what followed was a series of questions like "Is this really cabbage?"

"Let's just do a Hikawa Restaurant for next year's school festival." Class-rep Terada's suggestion sent the girls into a frenzy. "Nao, can you make a chocolate parfait with tofu?" "How about cakes with cabbage?" I better pray that I can.

Just then, Mafuyu mumbled,

"..... Chiaki has been eating Naomi's dishes all this time?"

"Mmm, they always invite me over for parties and stuff. Like during Christmas, for example. Every year, Uncle always shows off the new sound system he has bought. I never understand a single bit of what he's talking about, but I do know that Nao's cooking is delicious."

Mafuyu scowled, then shifted her gaze from Chiaki to me. Urm, what's wrong?

"Do you two celebrate Christmas together every year?"

Mafuyu's sudden question caused my heart to pump wildly. I never expected her to touch on the subject of Christmas herself.

"We spend it together almost every year," answered Chiaki in my stead. She was looking at me with a meaningful smile on her face, so I could only nod my head in agreement. From the murderous auras I felt around me, I could tell that the guys in our class were listening to our conversation intently beyond the wall of girls surrounding us. "He actually spends Christmas together with Chiaki every year?" "Go die, Nao." "Stuff yourself with cabbage cake." The combined attack of Mafuyu's gaze and the guys' resentful words was more than I could handle, so I came up with a random reply and escaped from the classroom.

When I reached the practice room, I plugged my bass into the amplifiers and waited for my heartbeat to return to its usual rhythm, then sat down on the round chair with a sigh.

"Oi, why are you running away?"—I thought to myself.

Didn't the conversation fortuitously steer towards the topic of Christmas? You should've gone with the flow and asked Mafuyu!

Should've checked if she's free this year! Asked how she's planning to spend her Christmas! Wouldn't that have been easy enough?

Of course not. The whole class was watching. I would've definitely stirred up something huge if I had popped that question in front of everyone. But then again, will I really find another opportunity like that? I am really useless.

I mean, I've never even invited a girl to spend Christmas with me before. Chiaki did come over to play during most Christmases, but Tetsurou was always the one that invited her.

If I'm able to ask Mafuyu out, we will be alone together. And on our way back home from the live house, we'll be strolling down the streets together beneath the night sky, surrounded by Christmas jingles. Wham!, Yamashita Tatsuro, or the B'z..... Wait a second, why are those all songs about unrequited love? I swung my head hard to shake those melodies out of my mind. That was really inauspicious.

I gripped the neck of my bass and tried thinking about more typical Christmas songs. Perhaps that song will grant me the courage to ask Mafuyu out.

As I fumbled the strings with my fingers, a slow melody began to flow.

What was surprising to me was the fact that I managed to recall the complete Latin lyrics of <Ave Maria>, composed by Gounod. The accompaniment to <Ave Maria> had been written to be superimposed on Book I of Bach's <[The Well-Tempered Clavier](#)>.

That was the first piece Mafuyu had played for me, back on a certain day.

She had played it at the junkyard located at the ends of the world, so that I could locate this bass.

When did I fall in love with Mafuyu? While humming to the tune of the hymn, I reminisced about all the days I had spent together with her.

The spring when we met; the summer when we brushed by each other; the autumn when we were separated.

We had always been linked by music.

But perhaps it shouldn't be like that. I have no intention of blaming the god of music, but the current me doesn't even know what's going on in Mafuyu's mind. I've always used music as a medium for conveying the feelings I couldn't put into words—

Suddenly, the door behind me creaked open, causing me to swallow the melody back down my throat in surprise. My fingers, however, remained frozen on the strings. I turned around, and at the entrance of the door, I saw a pair of blue eyes and maroon-colored hair.

"Ah. S-Sorry."

Why am I apologizing?

"It's okay to come in."

We were supposed to gather in the practice room during the break after we finished eating, so I couldn't possibly hog the room for myself just because I was dwelling on some negative thoughts. Mafuyu timidly slid into the room and closed the door after quickly peeking outside.

"Ah—" "Urm—"

Our voices overlapped. We exchanged a glance, but turned our gazes to the floor immediately after. Neither of us said anything. After a brief silence, I worked up the courage to lift my head and prepared myself to speak, but Mafuyu did the exact same thing, so we turned our gazes away once again. What the heck are we doing?

Mafuyu sat down on the round chair. My head was still lowered, so the only thing I could see was her feet. An awkward silence permeated the cold and dense air of the practice room. Crap, I have to say something. I mean, it's a rare opportunity for us to be alone together. And yet, I couldn't come up with anything to say.

While we were being worn down by time like two wax statues, a blurry sound suddenly came from the direction of the sun. It was a duet between a horn and a trombone—it was probably the band practicing. The melody being played was the all too familiar tune, [<Joy to the World>](#). The band was repeating the same phrase over and over again, but was speeding up each time..... Wait a second? Hey! Why's the tune turning into the [main theme of Lupin III](#)? I

nearly fell off my feet. At the same time, Mafuyu stood up angrily and was about to turn around.

We crossed sights again, but this time around, we couldn't help but laugh. Mafuyu swayed her long maroon hair and returned back to her seat.

"It's a long-standing tradition for the band to come up with some sort of prank for their yearly performance."

"I did something like that before."

That's surprising. I never thought Mafuyu would be one to fool around. That was quite unimaginable.

"During my performance of Book 2 of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>, I slipped <Santa Claus is Coming to Town> into the fugue. Back then, I was thinking to myself, 'Why am I being forced to hold a Christmas concert?' But I became even more depressed when no one noticed my prank."

"Ah....."

I was speechless. Mafuyu's expression darkened as she lifted her legs onto the chair and hugged her knees.

I see. So she had to work on Christmas Eve as well. But what about last year? She should've stopped playing the piano by then already.

"Last year, I spent the whole day at home with Hitomi."

Hitomi..... Oh, that was Miss Matsumura. She was the young female butler of the Ebisawa household—a mysterious and expressionless lady.

"What about your father? He probably wasn't in Japan at the time, right?"

"Papa was performing Beethoven's Ninth."^[2]

I see. So the reason why Ebichiri had come back only at the end of the year, was because he had forcibly worked the performance of Beethoven's Ninth into his schedule huh? Urm, well then..... I took a deep breath.

"..... What..... about this year then?"

Mafuyu's hair shook for a moment. I could almost feel her flinch despite our distance.

I said it. I actually asked her. When I regained my senses, my gaze was directed at the floor again. I have to look her in the face.

Mafuyu and I looked into each other's eyes.

Those deep-sea blue eyes of hers were filled with unease.

"Urm, well, d-do you have..... any..... plans for this..... Christmas?"

I was struck by a sudden pang of nervousness. And as I tried to squeeze my words out, my eyes landed on an area near Mafuyu's lips.

Mafuyu shook her head slowly.

"I think..... it will probably be the same as last year."

An inconceivable and warm sensation flowed up from my stomach to an area beneath my lungs. It was thumping wildly. Now's not the time for me to be happy just yet though. The crucial thing is what happens next. Come on, say it.

"Well, then..... together—"

I was so nervous, I had forgotten how to speak. Together? Mafuyu tilted her head in response to that word.

Just then, the door to the practice room suddenly flung open. The main theme of Lupin III came rushing into the room, and Mafuyu's hair soared with the gust of air. Next to the surprised Mafuyu was a long, slender silhouette. I swallowed the words that were in my mouth.

"Kyouko.....?"

There was a tremble in Mafuyu's murmur. It was actually because of this interruption that I realized I could feel my heart thumping through my ears.

"Nice timing. So you two were already here."

With her hand resting against the door, Senpai flashed a clear smile.

"Geez, Senpai! That's just too pushy of you!"

A voice came from behind Senpai—and Chiaki's head popped out. Her eyes briefly made contact with mine, then alternated between looking at Mafuyu and me. Her cheeks were all puffed up. What's going on here?

"Our next live performance has been decided."

Said Senpai, as she grabbed Chiaki's hands and walked into the room.

"Eh....."

Why the sudden decision..... Actually, that's just the way she is. Mafuyu was actually retreating towards the wall in shock. Senpai then fished a photocopied paper out of her chest and placed it on the amplifiers.

"Or more specifically, we're not guaranteed a spot on the stage. It's going to be a huge event with professional bands participating, so whether or not we make it to the stage will depend on our audition. Just the thing for our next performance, yeah?"

"Eh, ah, yeah....."

I shifted my gaze to the piece of paper and froze on the spot.

The event was called "Snow Crash." I think I heard that somewhere before—yeah, Tomo had mentioned it at the live house back then.....

"..... A-And it will be held on?"

I already knew the answer—it was even clearly written on the piece of paper. But I still couldn't help but ask that incredibly stupid question. Kagurazaka-senpai flashed me what was probably the brightest smile I had ever seen from her, and replied,

"December 24th. Christmas Eve."

Notes

1. Horse racing (競馬) is pronounced as "keiba". And well, it sounds similar to gay bar.
2. short for Beethoven's Symphony no.9]

Chapter 4 - Two Melodies, Two Voices

That was the fifth time I had seen that car.

After walking past the turn, I was standing in a position where I could see the garage of my house. One look and I knew immediately what was going on—because that was the fifth time already. The sun was already setting, as the days were shorter in the winter. The black hood of the foreign car shimmered faintly under the rays of the porch lights; and from where I stood, I could hear the rumbling sounds of an orchestra.

There was no point in running away (since it was my house), so I sighed and opened the porch door.

"That's why I'm asking you to try it once! It'll definitely be interesting! Since you're planning to play this piece faithfully, you should be faithful in areas like this as well, shouldn't you?"

"Don't be silly! The replacement melody was written precisely because the soloist could not hit the high notes in the very first performance!"

"But it's printed on the published scores too! Come on, try it! You never know, it may just fit!"

"Do you want me to ruin the performance or something? And you are asking me to find a second baritone just for this part? What rubbish!"

"How about you sing it?"

"Enough of your jokes!"

Tetsurou and Ebisawa Chisato, separated by a table with a few pieces of paper on it, were engaged in a heated argument when I entered the living room. The melody of Beethoven's <Symphony No. 9> was booming over the speakers, but the two guys were arguing with voices comparable to the volume of the orchestra. On one side of the table, was a famous conductor with white hair wearing a crisp

suit; and on the other, the industry's ruffian—though his sloppy sportswear made him look more like a hobo instead. Seeing them pointing at each other's noses and arguing at the top of their lungs, I doubt anyone would question the fact that they used to be classmates.

I had originally planned to sneak past the kitchen unnoticed, but I was called out by them.

"So you're back, Nao. Listen to me, Ebichiri's just atrocious!"

"Oh right, help me drill some sense into him. Hikawa is coming up with all these crazy suggestions for the arrangement."

Wait, why are you guys throwing your problems onto me? I'm physically and mentally drained already. Senpai had come up with that sudden decision to participate in the live performance just a day ago. And because of the upcoming audition, our practice was really solid.

But performing at the event means I won't be able to invite Mafuyu out on Christmas Eve.

While I was engrossed in my own thoughts, Tetsurou grabbed me by the shoulders and made me sit down at the table. Lying before me, was the conductor score for <Symphony No. 9>.

"Urm..... so what's going on here?"

"Ebichiri intends to faithfully reproduce Beethoven's original orchestration during his performance of Beethoven's Ninth at the end of the year. And as a result, he's ignoring the revisions by Wagner and Weingartner!"

"Oh....." Just let him be.

"This is just unbelievable! He even intends to reproduce the trumpet parts in the final movement that were gnawed away by worms! Muhuhuhu, now I'm burning with anticipation. I'll definitely come up with a great article to blast his performance."

There were various problems with Beethoven's original handwritten scores, so past musicians had modified Beethoven's Ninth by adding in all sorts of arrangements. That is to say, the Beethoven's Ninth that we're used to (regardless of whether it is good or bad), is different from what Beethoven had originally envisioned for the

piece. So Ebichiri wants to return it to what it once was?

"The baritone's recitativo is actually supposed to be two melodies, so I asked Ebichiri to change it to a duet as it was originally supposed to be in the scores. But Ebichiri rejected my proposition."

"But of course. It is not supposed to be a duet."

"Who cares, just try it! Listen to this, Nao. Ebichiri, you sing the second part."

Tetsurou stopped the CD and played a tape instead, and what came out of the speakers, was Ebichiri's voice giving the orchestra his instructions. The tape had probably been recorded during a practice. Shortly after, the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth began. The dissonance between the strings and the rest of the orchestra clashed, then reached a climax after the collapse. The two middle-aged men beside me began singing "O Freunde!"—my head hurt listening to their duet. What the hell are they doing? Look at their ages.....

"This will definitely become a joke."

Ebichiri snapped. He stopped singing and turned the tape recorder off.

"Why? Our voices were really consistent, no? Oh I know, I'll go on stage as the second baritone. I'll give you a discount on the performance fee—I mean, I did used to be in the choir. What do you think about my singing, Nao?"

"I want to go home....."

I was at my limit. I didn't come into this world to perform a comedy act with these middle-aged men!

"Which home? Are you referring to Misako's house?"

"It's quite problematic for me if you're asking me that question seriously....." Anywhere but here, damn it! I guess I might as well escape to Misako's house.

"But Misako is in Hong Kong until the end of the month, so she's not at home. Her company has plans to expand into China."

"How do you know that?"

Tetsurou said Misako criticized him really harshly every time they

met up after the divorce, and there were even times when she refused to speak to him.

"Ahaha, that's because she's actually still in love with me. I occasionally call her, and she always says something like, 'I'll be busy from this date to that date because of these activities, so you're prohibited from calling me!' Her words may be harsh, but she always keeps me informed about her schedule. What a dishonest woman she is! Isn't that really cute?"

"Then don't get divorced in the first place! It's about time you two face reality!"

"I wouldn't have enrolled in the College of Music if I could do what you said."

"Do not lump me together with you, Hikawa. I enrolled in college with the aim of becoming a professional musician."

"Drop that cool act of yours, Ebichiri. You're divorced as well, so we should be fellow comrades, isn't that right? Oh yeah, we're buddies! Let's sing songs filled with happiness and joy together!"

Tetsurou started going crazy and began singing [**<Ode to Joy>**](#), so I tossed a cushion at him to shut him up. I picked up my bass, and just as I was about to walk out of the living room.....

"Ah, ahem."

Ebichiri cleared his throat behind me. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Actually, I came here because I have something to ask you."

I placed my hand on the doorknob and tried my hardest to repress the feeling of resignation that was spreading throughout my body. I see, I guessed as much. It always turns out like this.

I placed my bass behind the sofa and sat down again.

"U-Urm. What do you want to know?"

I knew it would be something related to Mafuyu even before he answered. Ebichiri crossed his fingers and rested his chin on his hands. He hesitated a moment before saying,

"My Beethoven's Ninth concert will only go up until the 23rd. I will be taking a break after that."

"Ok."

"And so, well....." Surprisingly, Ebichiri shifted his gaze away. There was a long pause before he continued, "I do wish to celebrate Christmas with my family once in a while."

I knew I was sweating behind my back; and I had a pretty good idea why Ebichiri showed up at my house. I really felt like running away.

"Little did I expect that she would reject me after I told her that yesterday. It seems Mafuyu will be busy on the 24th."

Stop looking at me with upturned eyes. It's really disgusting, you know?

"And then..... mmm..... I asked her what she will be doing, but she refused to give me an answer."

"I know the answer. Isn't there a love hotel located behind the shopping mall in front of the bus station? That must be it. It's the only hotel in the vicinity that cost eight thousand yen a night."

"Just shut up, Tetsurou....."

I had no strength left in me to come up with a retort. "Did you just say a love hotel!?" Ebichiri sprung up in anger, but I was too drained of my strength to calm him down.

That eight thousand yen is useless anyway.



I recalled what had happened during the lunch break that day. Kagurazaka-senpai had barged into the room suddenly when Mafuyu and I were the only ones inside; then, she announced the date of the live performance.

The first person to snap back to reality was Mafuyu.

"..... An audition?"

"Yeah. This is an actual commercial event. I managed to squeeze us in at the very last moment, and have sent in the tapes already. Our audition will be held early next month. A live performance."

Senpai was pacing around the room in circles; Chiaki, who was

behind Senpai, had crossed her arms with a look of resignation on her face; Mafuyu was leaning against the sound system; and me, I was leaning my arm against the amplifiers to steady myself. It wasn't the first time I had been shocked by one of Senpai's announcements, but she was acting really swiftly this time. She should've heard about Snow Crash from Tomo around the same time I did, which was only last Saturday.

"I've already confirmed that my fellow comrades will be free on Christmas Eve. I believe everyone will fight alongside with me this time as well, yes?"

Senpai scanned our faces once more as she asked that question with a bright smile on her face.

Mafuyu glanced at me hesitantly for some reason. Our Christmas Eve was shattered just like that, and was left floating between us. What should I do?

Mafuyu moved her gaze away all of a sudden.

"Have you decided on the piece we will be performing for the audition?"

I could feel the lifeline snapping when I heard Mafuyu ask that question. Our date on Christmas Eve—no, it wasn't a definite thing yet, but.....

"..... Are you okay with this?"

Asked Chiaki, as she popped her head out from behind Senpai's shoulder. I had no idea if she was directing that question at me or Mafuyu; I didn't know what she was trying to confirm.

But Mafuyu nodded her head slightly in response. She then made her way to the amplifiers and picked up the photocopied brochure of the event.

"A disco event? That means we will have to perform songs of that genre as well?"

"Well, the event will be held at a club, so disco music should be more popular among our target audience, especially if you consider their age. But it'll be boring if all we play is disco, so I have a few propositions in mind."

Senpai pulled a few minidisks out from her guitar case and stacked them on the amplifiers, then fished out a few stacks of scores as well.

"The audition will be twenty minutes long, and I plan to spend around half the time on passacaglia, to surprise the hell out of our judges."

"I agree that we should make full use of whatever methods are available to us. I have no problem performing that nonstop for twenty minutes if that's what you want." Chiaki joined the conversation at the amplifiers from the side.

"We have the advantage of having two vocals, so I'm planning to show them our prowess in the latter half of the audition."

"I wish to use the synthesizers if possible. The performance at the school festival was nowhere near perfect."

"I do agree with you, but I think we'll be facing quite a few problems visually. I'll have to come up with something."

"Right, if we synchronize with the guitar—"

The only thing I could do was stare at the three girls exchanging their views seriously as I remained rooted to the floor. It wasn't until Senpai pinched my cheeks that my body became unfrozen.



"..... Nao? Hello, Nao?"

I finally regained my senses after my face was slapped repeatedly. When I came to, Tetsurou's face was right in front of mine, so I retreated on reflex, causing me to nearly fall backwards. Ebichiri was staring at me with irritation from the sofa. Shit, how long did I blank out?

"Why are you spacing out? You should at least wait until December before you start dreaming about that passionate night on Christmas Eve."

"T-That's not it!"

I realized Ebichiri was glaring at me with a really scary expression on his face. I swallowed my words immediately.

"Urm, well, in any case, it's nothing like what you're imagining."

"What do you mean by that? Are you planning to spend the night outside together with Mafuyu again?"

"That's right, Nao. It'll only cost you four thousand eight hundred yen if you're resting at the hotel. There's no need to spend the night there."

"Tetsurou—!" "Shut your trap, Hikawa!"

"The love hotel's a really messy place on Christmas Eve, you know? I'm offering you advice because I'm worried about you as a parent." I don't need those sorts of concerns from my parent!

"I-In any case!" I kicked Tetsurou aside and turned towards Ebichiri. I raised my voice.

"It's not just Mafuyu and me. The band will be holding a live performance on the 24th."

"A live performance.....?"

The color of Ebichiri's face changed at least seven times—there were times when it was fuming red, and others when it was ghastly white. He then heaved a huge sigh and slumped his body deep into the sofa.

"The band again huh..... But we had talked about her resuming concerts again next year."

There was an obvious displeasure in his voice.

"She's practicing the piano as well, isn't she?"

"Of course. But to be perfectly honest, I am still against Mafuyu playing in the band."

"Why..... is that?"

"According to Matsumura, the amount of time Mafuyu spends practicing the piano is much more than what she used to spend two years ago. But despite that, she is also practicing the guitar as well. You do realize just how straining that is, don't you?"

I clenched my fists unconsciously. She actually increased her practice time? Considering the average time a professional spends on the piano each day, she should be practicing at least six hours

every day after she reaches home. And considering that our band practice ends around six in the evening, that means she's always practicing until midnight, at the very least. And she's actually practicing much more than that? When does she sleep?

"Mafuyu is doing all this of her own accord, and that includes the band as well. But you already know she has a bad habit of forcing herself without giving any consideration to her body."

I could only nod my head in response to that.

"And so, how should I put it? That girl is continuing on with the band because she wants to be with you, right? If you tell her that it is no longer necessary—"

"Please, enough of this joke of yours."

My voice sounded like it was pressing against a blunt blade or something; and Ebichiri was forced to swallow his words. I knew it was selfish of me to say that, but those were my true feelings.

"Mafuyu..... she..... she didn't join the band for a reason like that. It's because she's the guitarist of feketerigó, and because she enjoys creating music together with Senpai, Chiaki, and..... me. That's why she's staying in the band."

My words were actually stabbing deeper into my heart than Ebichiri's words ever did. Ebichiri lowered his eyes and sighed.

"..... Is that so? I am sorry."

I shook my head. The things Ebichiri said were right. I really felt like kicking myself to death. That was really embarrassing of me.

Mafuyu chose the band instead of me—although I was thinking that, I knew very well just how abnormal that thought of mine was.

"I will leave Mafuyu in your hands. Please inform me if anything happens."

Said Ebichiri with a calm voice all of a sudden. He then stood up.

"Sorry for interrupting."

Tetsurou waved his hand while still lying on the sofa. As for me, I didn't stand up. The only sounds I heard were the opening and closing of the door, and the exhaust of the foreign car disappearing into the distance in the night. Just what exactly did that man come

here for? Did he really make that trip just to discuss that matter?

"That guy has taken quite a liking to you, Nao. That's why he comes over frequently."

"Eh? Ehh? Ehhhhhhhhhh?"

Ebichiri? I don't quite remember doing anything that put me in his good graces.

"Moreover, I'm the only friend he has in Japan. It must be really lonely for him."

"Now that's quite the lonely life he has....."

Tetsurou is his only friend? He might actually be better off without any at all.

"..... Well then, when will Mafuyu come over to greet her new father-in-law?"

"You've been rattling on nonstop, damn it!"

"Because you had called Mafuyu directly by her name several times, and Ebichiri was totally fine with it. Since her father has already accepted you, it'll only be a matter of time."

"Eh? N-No way!"

But then again, t-that might actually be true! Whoa! What should I do? Was Ebichiri pissed off because of that.....?

"Hurry up get engaged with her. I'm dying to see Ebisawa Mafuyu in a kimono."

"Get engaged yourself!"

I didn't expect Tetsurou to act out a pretend engagement scene with the music of Beethoven playing in the background. My headache was kicking in again, so I ran to my room with my head in my arms.

Chapter 5 - Mini Amplifier, Water Tower, Le Tango Perpétual

"Stop!"

Yelled Chiaki from behind the drums, as she lifted her hands while firmly gripping her drumsticks. I stopped my fingers from strumming the strings and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

Senpai and Mafuyu pressed the neck of their guitars with their right hand to stop the lingering sounds, and the rock tune that had filled the Folk Music Research Club practice room just a second ago, turned into the painful sound of killjoy in my ears.

The three girls looked at me at the same time. Unable to bear the inquiring gaze of Mafuyu, the teasing look of Senpai and the emotional gaze of Chiaki, I was forced to rest my eyes on the bass in my hands.

"You tell him, Comrade Aihara. I think we're all thinking the same thing, but you're the only one that young man will listen to right now."

Chiaki nodded and pointed her drumstick at me.

"Quit sticking to me all the time!"

I almost dropped the bass from my hands due to my shock. I was surprised by the meaning behind her words—though, in a musical sense, of course.

"I deliberately slowed down the tempo to convey the lazy mood! It won't do if you play your part in a similar manner and overemphasize the laziness! The bass and the drums operate on different timings, so you'll have to be livelier than that!"

"Uh....."

Chiaki's words hit me really hard, because I knew very well that she was right.

"It seems like you lack practice, young man. Did you think I wouldn't notice you fumbling your way through the fill-ins during the unisons?"

The sinister grin on Senpai's face made her look like she was teasing a cat—I shrunk my body in response.

"Are you trying to screw things up so we fail the audition?"

"N-No way!"

I crossed my hands vigorously in denial. But Senpai's smile didn't disappear.

"Here, Comrade Ebisawa. You tease him a little too."

"E-Eh?" Mafuyu's hair flinched in response to Senpai's sudden words, but her sapphire-blue eyes were still intently fixed on my face. Just as I was about to turn my body away, Mafuyu spoke.

"..... Coward. Why didn't you express yourself clearly?"

That was the line that surprised me the most—to the point that I accidentally flicked off the power of the bass's amplifiers. Urm, she's referring to how my bass sounded, right? Senpai let out a loud laugh.

"Let's take a break! Young man needs some time to reflect on things anyway."

"For how long? It's already five—there's not much time left."

Mafuyu's fingers, which were resting on the strings of the guitar, moved uneasily.

"Till the sleeping young man wakes up?"

"It'll take until next year for that to happen! There's only a few days left till the audition! When exactly is it anyway?" asked Chiaki.

"The time hasn't been confirmed yet, as quite a number of bands have registered for the event. I think they should be contacting us soon."

"Will we be playing our actual performance songs during the audition?" interrupted Mafuyu. "If so, we will have to decide on the order of the songs, as there are quite a few songs that I want to play."

"Hey, how about we put in some Christmas carols at the end of our performance, so the audience can sing along? I mean, it *will* be Christmas Eve."

"I think, for now, we should just aim to clear the audition with songs that we're familiar with. That's an option for us as well—"

I listened to their conversation from a distance, then pulled the wire out of the amplifier and plugged it into the mini amplifier instead.

"..... I'll be practicing by myself for a while."

Mafuyu was surprised by that, and was about to remove her guitar strap from her shoulder, but I quickly turned around and opened the door. And what greeted me were the rays of the setting sun in that icy winter.



The rooftop that I typically went to was located right above our practice room, so I made my way to the rooftop on the other side of the school instead. When I arrived there, the sun was already deep below the horizon. And as the school slowly became enshrouded in darkness, I could see the small silhouettes of the baseball team tidying up the court.

At the side of stairwell leading to the protruding roof, there was a ladder that led to the large water tower on top. I heaved my bass on my back and climbed my way up; and when I sat down and viewed the scenery before me, I saw lights scattered across the streets on the opposite side of the school. It looked much more like the starry sky than the real thing above my head.

I placed the mini amplifier beside me, then rested my bass on my leg and began to fiddle with the strings. I played the same phrase over and over again—slowly, at half the original tempo.

But I couldn't immerse myself in the music. It was as if the strings had managed to read my thoughts and were rejecting my fingers.

Senpai's words rang in my ears.

"Are you trying to screw things up so we fail the audition?"

That was never my intention, but I would be lying if I said that that

idea had never crossed my mind after Senpai had told us about the audition.

Why must it be on the twenty-fourth? It would've been great if it was held on any other day.

But what baffled me even more was Mafuyu—she seemed so incredibly enthusiastic about it. I know it's wrong to take that to heart, but even so.....

It won't do if things continue on like this. I'd be dragging the girls down yet again—I had been plagued by this feeling ever since our live performance at the school festival. I had improved compared to half a year ago, but the three girls—especially Chiaki—were climbing at an even faster pace. The current me—who can only strum as best I can, and is unaware of the things going on around me—will definitely be left far behind by them. I should just forget about the thing with Mafuyu. It isn't like I actually asked her out on Christmas Eve anyway.

My thoughts were pulled to that time when Mafuyu and I were alone in that room—that moment just before Senpai came barging in.

It would've been great if I could've at least popped that question.

My fingers had already stopped by the time I regained my senses. I let out a wry laugh. Wasn't I here to get in some practice alone? Why am I allowing my thoughts to run astray?

"—Naomi?"

I was shocked by the voice coming from the darkness. I forgot I was sitting on the ledge of the tower, and almost stood up in surprise. That was dangerous.

Looking down, I crossed sights with Mafuyu, who had popped her head out of the door of the stairwell. For a second, I wanted to find a place to hide, but the small space on the water tower was barely enough for even one person to sit down by himself.

"U-Urm....."

While I was trying to come up with something to say, I deliberately gripped my bass to make it look like I was practicing hard; but in the meantime, Mafuyu had turned her head around and caught sight of the ladder.

"W-Wait."

Mafuyu ignored my nervousness and grabbed onto the ladder. But for some reason, she was only using her left hand. She pressed her chest against the side rail and climbed up clumsily. I quickly leaned my body over and stretched my hand out to pull Mafuyu up.

Mafuyu stood on the cramped ledge of the water tower, panting and heaving as she gripped my hand tightly. Her face was ghastly white.

"A-Are you alright?"

"..... I am okay, just a little scared."

Then why did you come up? And also—

My gaze landed on Mafuyu's right hand, which she was using to grab the hem of my coat.

"Your right hand..... it can't be..... that you can't move it again?"

"Eh? Ah, n-no."

Mafuyu shook her head. Her maroon hair came into contact with my chest.

"T-This is just a habit from the past..... Before I realized, I was already doing things with only my left hand."

Don't push yourself. I stared intently at the fingers of Mafuyu's right hand, which were buried inside my chest. When Mafuyu noticed what I was doing, she blushed and quickly retracted her arm. But we were still forced to sit side by side with our arms contacting each other, because the space around the water tower was so small.

After that, the two of us looked down at the school surrounded by walls and encircled by darkness. And at the same time, we counted each other's thumping heartbeats. Despite my desire to convert my breathing into speech, nothing came out—because my voice was stuck in the back of my throat. The sleeve of the winter uniform sticking tightly to my skin was making me too nervous to speak.

Again. It was always the same. Whenever Mafuyu sat down next to me, the warmth of her body always made my mind go blank. The frustration that was tormenting me earlier had disappeared as well. Why does this happen?

Come to think of it, Mafuyu and I have come into contact with each other a countless number of times since we met. So the painful, conscious throbbing I'm experiencing right now is a result of me realizing my feelings.

Painful. Yes, it is painful.

"U-Urm."

Mafuyu finally spoke again. Her voice was no longer trembling.

"M-Mmm."

"Are you angry?"

I couldn't help but look in Mafuyu's direction. Half her face was hidden under the shadows.

"Why..... I'm not angry....."

I wasn't angry. I was Just losing myself.

"But, it seems like..... you dislike the practices."

"I don't dislike them!"

I almost fell off because I suddenly turned my body. "Whoa!" "Kyaa!" I seized the leg of the water tower while Mafuyu grabbed my shoulder, allowing me to regain my balance.

When I recovered from that shock, I turned my head to look at Mafuyu's face. Despite the fact that her face was burning red, she didn't let go of my shoulder.

"I could tell from the sounds. Naomi's bass was trying to run away from my Stratocaster."

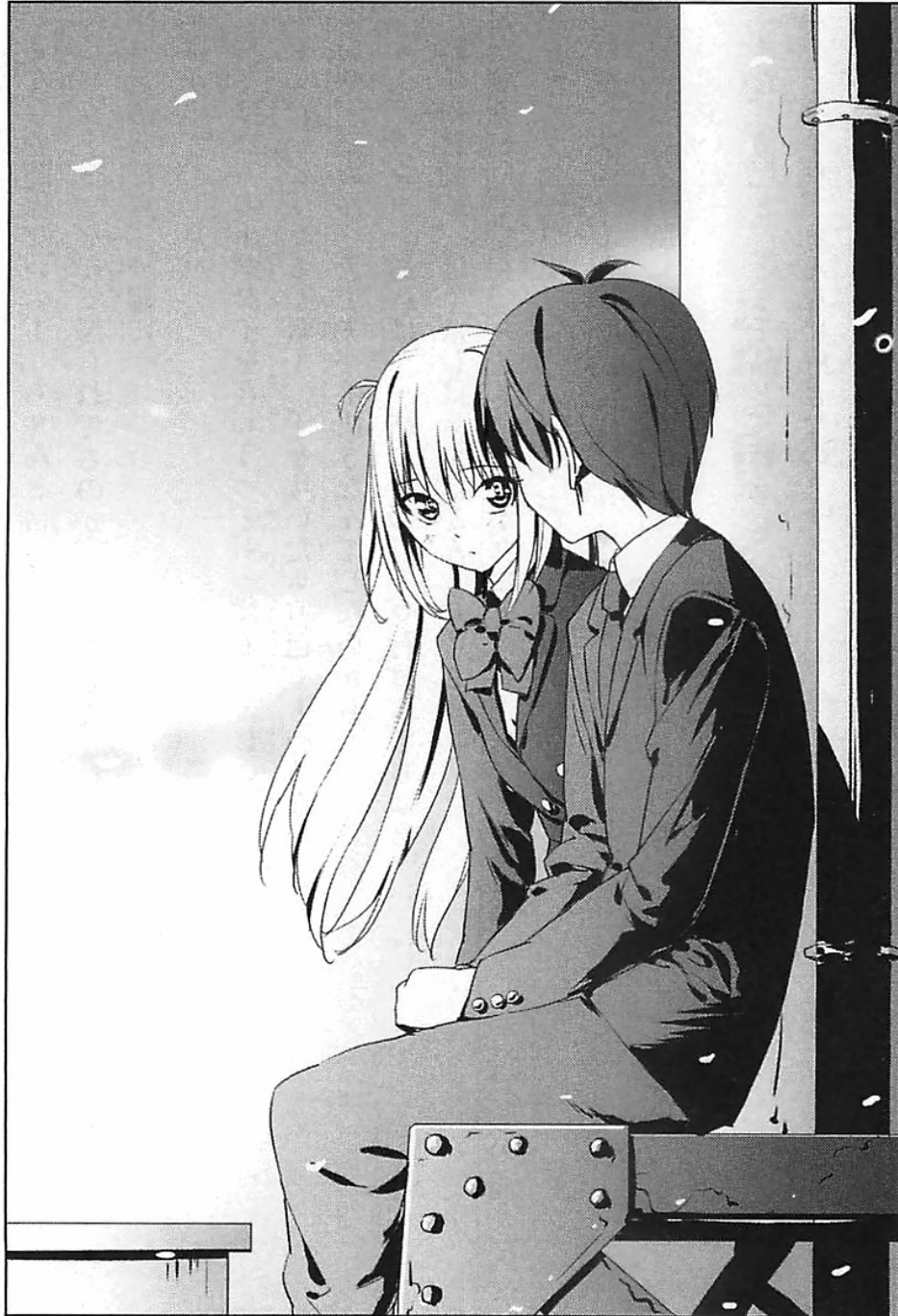
I was stunned. I never thought music would betray my feelings so easily—I guess its not always on my side. I gripped the neck of my bass tightly as it lay on my thigh. I wonder..... if there comes a day when I have mastered the instrument and can play it on an entirely different level, would I be able to play the bass calmly despite the hesitation and confusion in my heart?

"Did you have something planned for Christmas? Back then, you—"

She popped the question.

I took a deep breath and nodded to prepare myself mentally, then turned towards the sapphire-blue eyes that reflected the starry

skies.



"I was thinking about what birthday present I should give you."

The blue, icy walls in Mafuyu's eyes were silently melting away.

"Do you know who Arthur Honegger is? He's a French composer. I originally wanted to give you a record of his <Une Cantate de Noël>. Urm, and I also had a friend that would be performing that piece on stage during Christmas. It's a great song, so....."

My parched throat was about to tear apart.

"I originally..... wanted to..... attend the live concert..... together..... with Mafuyu. But..... well..... Senpai signed us up to take part in the audition..... for that live performance."

I could feel my face getting hotter and hotter as I said that. I was afraid that I was going to shift my gaze back to my knees, so I stiffened my neck and continued,

"I originally wanted..... the two of us..... to spend Christmas together. But....."

"Why?"

Mafuyu raised her voice all of a sudden. I moved my head back in surprise.

"Why did you not tell me?"

The light in her eyes was shimmering on the surface of the water.

"N-No, but, Senpai's already fixated on that live performance!"

"That has nothing to do with it! You should have told me all the same!"

"Sorry....." Though I had no idea why she was so angry. "Urm, well, if we don't pass the audition, we could....."

"You idiot!"

Mafuyu forcefully tugged my tie. That hurts.

"We have to pass! I will never forgive anyone who would dare to screw it up deliberately! Not even you, Naomi!"

"No, sorry. Don't you worry, I'd never do that."

"We will be able to perform live together if we pass the auditions, no?"

I was stunned for a while by her words.

If we pass, I'll be able to attend the live Christmas performance together with Mafuyu—though we'd be taking part in it as performers. Indeed. Moreover, I'd also be able to save on the concert tickets. But still.....

"I want to perform live."

Murmured Mafuyu, as she pressed her palms against my chest while staring at the bass blending into the night sky.

"I wish to stand on the same stage together with Naomi..... and Chiaki, and Kyouko. Forever and ever."

Mafuyu's words flowed out from within her, and I was suppressed by those feelings of hers, which felt like they were searing my skin.

"..... Do you enjoy performing live that much?"

I accidentally asked that silly question impulsively, but Mafuyu nodded her head slowly in response.

"I am saddened every time I get on the stage."

"Eh.....?"

"Because it will all be over soon."

Mafuyu's words turned into frost and scattered in the sky.

"It will have to end someday, and that is saddening—if only this could go on forever."

Mafuyu placed her ten fingers on my arm and danced them to an uneasy tempo on the imaginary keyboard. Despite not hearing any sounds, I knew what the piece was. The music came from the touch of Mafuyu's fingers tapping on my skin. Erik Satie. [**<Le Tango Perpétuel>**](#).

"Back when piano was everything to me, I never thought I would experience feelings like this."

I nodded my head silently. It was the same for me as well. Back when all I did was listen to the music of others, I never knew such passion or pulsation existed.

"I want to continue playing; I want to let Kyouko sing; I wish to move forward together with Chiaki..... and I want to listen to the

sound of your heartbeat."

"..... Mmm."

Thinking back on how emotional I was earlier on, I felt really embarrassed. My thoughts were silly compared to Mafuyu's clear feelings for the band.

But Mafuyu kept quiet and turned her head away.

"..... And so, I am sorry."

"..... For?"

"Christmas. W-We are unable..... t-to spend Christmas together..... by ourselves."

"Eh? Ah, no." I was in a fluster. Did she see through my intentions? "It's okay, I don't mind."

"You don't? Why?"

"Because I haven't bought the tickets anyway..... That hurts, that hurts! Mafuyu! Let go of me!"

For some reason, Mafuyu sunk her fingernails—which were originally on my arms—deep into my skin. Why is she getting angry over what I said?

I don't get it. Would it be better if I did mind?

"I am not talking about the tickets! Don't you feel it is a shame?"

"No, of course I do. But it can't be helped, right?"

"Even if there is nothing you can do....." Mafuyu slapped me repeatedly on the arms. This is dangerous! We'll fall off! "It is all your fault! It would have been okay if you had told me about your plans for Christmas earlier!"

"Uhh..... Sorry."

Mafuyu was right. It was my fault for not telling her my plans, which made Senpai think we were all free for the live performance..... Eh?

Something suddenly hit me. Back then, I had asked Tomo about the price of the Christmas concert tickets—did Senpai know about that? It seemed like she was interested in what was happening, but who filled her in? No wait, she wouldn't have planned the live

performance if she had known about it. It's probably just me thinking too deeply into it.

The more important thing was—I'll have to come up with another present. I could still give her the Honegger record, but I had already told her about it; and if possible, I wanted the present to be a surprise. It'd be really boring if I just gave her what I originally had in mind.

Moreover, if we were attending the concert as performers, we might have to prepare backstage, and might miss the performance by Tomo's band. If so, giving Mafuyu <Une Cantate de Noël> would be meaningless. I somehow felt we were definitely going to pass the auditions, despite the lack of solid evidence that we would—Mafuyu wanted to pass, and I felt the same as well. Also, Mafuyu's guitar technique was getting better with each passing day. Is it because she has finally found an outlet for her thirst for passion?

Mafuyu's desire—the never-ending stage.

"Ah....."

It came to me all of a sudden, and was followed shortly by all the dumb things I had done. I hugged my head and lowered it in dismay.

"Ahhhhhhhh....."

"..... W-What is wrong? Sorry, does it hurt?"

Mafuyu stopped slapping my arm and inquired worryingly.

"Eh? Ah, no, not that."

I let go of my hands, but my head was still buried between my knees.

"I just figured out what I should give you....."

It was quite a smart idea—to me, anyway—and Mafuyu should be happy with it as well. But I had given it to Chiaki already. It was The Beatles' <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band> record. And it had to be the British version of the vinyl record. I had no idea if I could even find another one.

"..... Sorry, it's nothing. I'll definitely find a way to get it before your birthday."

"Birthday..... mine?"

"M-Mmm." She won't be troubled by that, right? I won't do anything more than just pass it to her secretly at school.

"It falls on a Sunday."

"Eh? A-Ahhhh!" I never noticed that. That's the worst possible timing. I buried my head between my knees again. But then, Mafuyu said something totally unexpected.

"Would you like to come to my house?"

Eh?

I wondered if my ears had heard right. When I lifted my head, I saw Mafuyu's face flushed red. It was obvious from her trembling lips that she was trying her best not to shift her eyes away.

"Would you like to come to my house on my birthday? If..... Naomi is..... n-not busy with anything. If you want to."

"Eh? Ah, u-urm, yeah. I'll go. Really? Can I?"

I still found it unbelievable. Visiting Mafuyu's house? Then again, won't Ebichiri be around? Will that be okay?

"Papa will be busy with a rehearsal, so he will not be around."

Mafuyu finally succumbed to the embarrassment and turned her gaze towards the darkness of the night.

But despite how dark it was, I could still see her burning cheeks.

"There is something..... I want to give to Naomi too. Something that cannot be carried around."

Something she wants to give me?

And something that can't be carried around?

My face felt like it was floating about like a crimson balloon. I don't recall what we said after that, but it was only after I had checked my phone, that I realized I had typed in the time of the visit into that day's schedule.



"How does Mafuyu always manage to find Nao?"

We bumped into Chiaki as we were walking down the stairs on our

way back to the practice room. It looked like she had split up with Mafuyu to search for me.

"Because I heard the sounds of the bass."

Mafuyu explained softly. Now that she mentions it, she does have a pair of really sharp ears. No wonder she could find me despite the fact that I was hiding in a place I don't normally go. Chiaki sulked, then moved her eyes from Mafuyu to me and slammed her fist into my stomach. Ouch.

"Whatever, let's go back pronto. We don't have much time left! Senpai's still waiting."

Chiaki pulled me by the hand while Mafuyu pushed me from behind, and I was forced to run down the corridor with my bass hugged in my arms.

Chapter 6 - Wax Figure, Bullets, Genes

I ended up turning to Tetsurou for assistance in my search for Mafuyu's present.

"<Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>? Don't we have one in the storeroom? You're in charge of the rock music, so search through it properly."

It was after dinner, and Tetsurou was lying down on the sofa like a Mafia boss, swirling his whiskey glass around as he chewed on dried shredded squid.

"Ah—mmm. Actually, I already gave that to someone else."

I lifted my eyes to look at the expression on Tetsurou's face and tried my best to look apologetic.

"Then head to the record store or something. You should be able to find one there."

"Urm, it has to be the vinyl record. It's complicated, so I can't explain. And it can't be the American or Japanese version—it has to be the original from Britain."

I snuck another peek at Tetsurou's face.

"So I thought I wouldn't be able to find it, even if I tried looking in some secondhand store. But if it's Tetsurou—you should be able to do something, right?"

"Look, that thing can cost up to ten thousand yen, you know?"

"I know. Please, the only thing I can depend on now is the power of the industry's ruffian!"

"Oh, so Nao has finally realized how great being the industry's ruffian is? So you understand now that you should be respecting me? Great, I'll teach you some exercises that'll get you on your way to becoming an industry ruffian right now!"

"Nope, I'll pass on that."

"Let's go into a little more detail. There are two major moves. Stretch your arms out wide—"

"There's no need for you to demonstrate for me!" I slammed the switch to turn off the <Turkish March>.

"Are you sure it's okay for you to talk to me like that? I may decide to not help you find the record, you know?"

"Ughhh....." Being indebted to the worst possible person really sucked.

"Whatever. As long as you genuflect before the power of my personal antenna."

With that said, Tetsurou actually managed to get his hands on a copy of <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band> the very next day. And it was way before Mafuyu's birthday, so there was no need to worry at all.

"Well then, how will Nao show his respect for me? Oh boy, I can't wait—"

Grinned Tetsurou, as he danced around while holding the record in his hand. Are you an elementary school kid or something? I swallowed that thought and tried to nurture the minute feelings of gratitude inside me, saying,

"..... I guess we'll have sukiyaki today."

"Matsusaka beef? Or Kobe?"

"Get your ass to work if you want beef like that!"

But even Australian beef was enough to make Tetsurou tear up. I have it easy with a father that's so easy to please. I mean, it's all up to the chef anyway when it comes to the food.

I hid myself in my room after dinner. I might've been acting with undue haste, but I immediately wrapped the record carefully with wrapping paper, and even bound it with a ribbon. After I finished, I went to go lie down on my bed. I buried my face in my pillow in embarrassment when I imagined myself handing Mafuyu the present. Crap. Will I even be able to remain composed? And I had to visit Mafuyu's house too.

A girl inviting me to her house—I had visited Chiaki's room several

times before, but if you removed her from the equation, it was my first time experiencing that. What should I do?

"Do you want me to pretend to be Ebisawa Mafuyu for your imaginary practice? I'm great at mimicking people's voices."

Asked Tetsurou, who had popped his head in through the door.

"Get the hell out!"

I threw my pillow at him to chase him away.



Kagurazaka-senpai didn't show up to morning practice the following day. That was the first time she had missed a practice since the school festival had ended. Given her absence, the three of us had no choice but to practice by ourselves until the lessons started, but she didn't appear even after the preparatory bell had rung.

"The audition's coming up soon. Maybe she's busy running around preparing for that," suggested Chiaki. I see. Senpai might be planning something again.

"But we won't be able to decide on the guitar arrangement for the string part without Senpai....."

"But Mafu-Mafu's guitar solo earlier made me shiver. Play like that for our actual performance too."

Said Chiaki, as she turned to face Mafuyu as Mafuyu was packing her Stratocaster into her guitar case. Mafuyu's eyes widened.

"..... That was because Kyouko was not around, so I played the vocalist's part in her stead....."

Murmured Mafuyu shyly. But I felt the same way Chiaki did. We had already chosen the last piece for our performance—John Lennon's <Happy Xmas>—but since Senpai was absent, Mafuyu had played the melody of the lead vocal instead. It was a vivid and commanding solo—a performance that Chiaki and I would never forget.

"It would definitely be cool if you suddenly joined in with your solo during the first chorus! All we need is Mafuyu's guitar and the

synthesizer."

"But I only have two hands."

"Ah, you're right."

I gave Chiaki's suggestion a thought as well.

<Happy Xmas> was a song sung by John Lennon, and, just as its name suggested, it was a melody that celebrated Christmas. But the song also featured children singing <War is Over>, a melody that yearned for peace. It was a song that consisted of two melodies being sung together at the same time.

And by having already reproduced John Lennon's part with her solo, it was as though Mafuyu was tossing that song into the air. It would be marvelous if we could combine that with the children's prayers, <War is Over>. And if so, all that would be left is simulating the organs using the synthesizers.

The idea was gradually taking shape in my head as I tidied up the instruments.

And when we left the room, I could almost hear the melody of the Christmas song behind that tightly shut door. After we had exited, Chiaki locked the door and looked to the sky as she rested her hand on the handle.

"..... If only we could be together forever."

Mafuyu and I turned around when we heard Chiaki's words. A faint smile appeared on Chiaki's face—but it disappeared in the blink of an eye. She continued,

"It'd be great if we could clear the audition in a spectacular fashion and spend Christmas together."

Mafuyu looked at me hesitantly. When our eyes met, she broke eye contact with me and turned her gaze towards Chiaki.

"..... Let us do our best," Mafuyu nodded with a soft murmur.

"Mmm..... At the very least, the four of us can be together."

Chiaki's smile was much lonelier than the skies of the early winter, but I couldn't say anything at all. It's time for our lessons—said Chiaki softly, before breaking into a run.



Our fourth lesson of the day—physical education—had just ended, and the guys had already finished changing. We were making our way back to the classroom from the sports complex when a bicycle burst through the school gates at an incredible speed, catching the attention of many of us. Those braids danced in the air like the tail feathers of a bird. She disappeared between the buildings.

"..... That's atrociously late." "And she's wearing casual attire. With a mini-skirt to boot, even though it's winter." "The sight of her back and her long slender legs when she was standing on the bicycle was just amazing."

Kagurazaka-senpai just reached school.....? What on earth is she doing? I rushed back to the classroom, placed my bento on Chiaki's desk, then dashed to the practice room. The lunch bell rang when I reached the lawn near the back of the building.

When I opened the door to the practice room, I froze on the spot.

"Oh hi, young man. You're here early."

"Whoaaaaa!"



I crossed sights with Senpai, who was sliding her arm through the sleeve of her blouse, and quickly retreated backwards. Not only

could I clearly see her bra, but her skirt was unbuttoned as well. "S-Sorry!" I yelled and turned away.

"I can't close the door if you don't step in, you know?"

"Quit your nonsense and get dressed right now!" I roared angrily with my back facing her. Senpai's giggles were cut off by the closing of the door. I took in huge gulps of air as I rested my hands on my knees.

"You can come in now, young man."

Those words slipped through the opening of the slightly ajar door. I walked in gullibly, and what greeted my eyes were Senpai's creamy shoulders and smooth bare back.

"—W-Why did you strip?"

I rushed out of the room in shock.

"I wanted to change into my victory underwear, so I thought I would get young man to help me with the hooks."

"Hook it yourself!"

"What a pity. I'm done changing. Don't you worry, you can step in now."

Really? I mean, really? I opened the door a millimeter and peeked through the tiny opening. Senpai was wearing the school uniform's coat—so I walked into the room.

"I thought it might not be a bad idea to openly seduce you once in a while, but it ended up a failure, I guess."

What? I have no idea what you're talking about. To shake the image of Senpai's smooth skin out of my mind, I turned my gaze away from her and tried my hardest to focus on setting up my bass. I had seen her in her swimwear before, but that felt like a totally different matter altogether.

"I've been wondering this for a while—don't you have any sexual desire, young man?"

"What do y-y-you mean by that?"

"I'm pretty confident about my back. Haven't you seen it five times already? Aren't you the least bit excited?"

"I've seen it only twice!" What on earth is this person blabbering about?

"So you remember the actual count. That makes me really happy."

Senpai flashed me that beastly smile of hers, something I hadn't seen in quite a while. I tried to retreat to a corner, but Senpai pressed her hands against the wall on both sides of my head to prevent me from moving about.

"..... S-Senpai? You're acting strange today. Is something wrong?"

"Mmm, something has made me really sad. I actually went to go meet the organizers of the Christmas performance just now."

"Oh."

"They've decided the date of our audition. It'll be next Saturday."

Saturday—I searched through my memory, then heaved a sigh of relief. It was the day before Mafuyu's birthday.

"I hoped they would change the time. I even went there in person to negotiate, but it was all for naught."

"Urm..... Saturday's no good?"

"Rather than that, it's more like it has to be on Sunday."

"Eh?" Why?

"Comrade Ebisawa's birthday falls on the next day, right?"

I was shocked. I couldn't comprehend the meaning behind Senpai's words, so I just stood there for a while in-between Senpai's arms, stunned.

"I want our audition to clash with her birthday."

"..... W-Why?"

"You're asking me why?" Senpai suddenly moved her face close to mine. The tips of our noses were almost touching. "Why else but to prevent you two from celebrating her birthday by yourselves?"

"Wha....."

"I managed to hinder you two on Christmas Eve, but it looks like I've lost this time."

Christmas Eve? Did she just say Christmas Eve? So that means

our participation in the live performance was—I see, so Senpai did know about my plans to invite Mafuyu to that performance.

But why? What's going on here?

"You really have no idea, do you? You're so amazingly dense, it's actually quite touching to watch."

Smiled Senpai, as she finally released me. My face was burning as though it had been placed in a furnace.

"Alright. The reason's actually quite simple, but I guess I'll start from the beginning, so that my feelings will reach your heart."

Senpai leaned against the wall and took her Les Paul out of her guitar case. At the same time, I rested my back against the wall and slid to the floor.

"I told you the reason I was born into this world. Do you still remember?"

I nodded. What's going on here? I could feel an unfathomable and scary attraction coming from the revolutionary of love in front of me. The jet-black guitar slung around her shoulder was like a deadly weapon that could gouge someone's heart out without harming the person's body.

"I have no idea what you're thinking, but I really do want to start a revolution in this world. Ever since the inception of the capitalistic economy, countless numbers of losers have died while on their quest to become the final revolutionary. With that said....."

Senpai sat on the desk and blinked.

"Why do you think those revolutionaries failed one after another?"

I cocked my head about two millimeters to the left and to the right.

"The reason's simple: they had the order wrong. You can't declare yourself a revolutionary right at the very beginning—because a fighter will die when his fame reaches its peak. It's pointless if he turns to ashes right after he's done spreading his message to the world. However—"

Senpai plugged her guitar into the amplifiers. A *pa* sound reverberated when she turned the power on—like the sound of a thick vein bursting apart.

"John Lennon was different; he was the most successful revolutionary in history. By becoming a musician first, he already had the attention of the world even before he started his fight. Even if the world forgets the name of Mikhail Bakunin or Lev Trotsky, John's name will forever remain in everyone's heart. Why is that so? Fundamentally speaking, you can't carve your feelings into other people's hearts with just words alone. There are only two ways to truly transmit your words deep into someone's soul: by bleeding, or by spreading them via song."

Senpai flicked on the switch of her Les Paul. A noise permeated the practice room. It felt like I was in someone's heart at that moment.

"If all revolutionaries chose to spread their words by throwing away their lives, then revolutionaries as a whole would die before the wake of dawn. I can't do something as stupid as that. What's the point of sacrificing your life in exchange for two or three lines recorded in a huge tome of famous quotes? You have to sing if you really wish to change the world. Singing will bring me to the top; and there, I shall say my words. I'll change this world, just like how I'd sculpt a wax figure with the warmth of my skin."

I could barely understand what Senpai was saying, but I understood one thing.

Senpai is bleeding right now.

But it wasn't her words that had reached me; it was her pain, oozing out all over, that had hit me in my heart. Why is this so? Why does she have such a sorrowful expression on her face?

"But I guess I'll probably die before I can achieve my dreams, like how John Lennon died at the mercy of four bullets. A king, even if he's at the top of the world, is helpless when it comes to evil and death..... Or rather, it's precisely *because* he's at the top of the world. But I have an advantage John didn't have. What do you think that is?"

That wasn't really a question. She just needed some time to take a breather as she bewitched me with her eyes and a lick of her lips.

"It's my gender. I'm a woman in love, get it? I can have a baby. I can ensure that the new life will not be harmed by bullets, and can

put my all into raising him. I will not allow my revolution to end with my life. Even if I die, my child can continue the march into the dawn of the new world."

Senpai rested her hand on the strings and looked up at the ceiling before letting out a sigh. The heavy atmosphere froze the air of the practice room. Senpai's fingers began to move all of a sudden. It was **<La Marseillaise>**—a song from the French Revolution that was bathed in fresh blood.

"..... Well, that's the prologue."

"That's the prologue!? It's too damn long!"

That retort was the first thing I said when I finally managed to take a breath. Senpai let out a loud laugh.

"Now then, with the speech done and over with, it's about time I confirm your doubt."

"By my doubt, you're referring to....." I had forgotten about it, as listening to her long speech had left me drained.

"The reason I prevented you from celebrating Christmas Eve with Mafuyu."

Ahh, yeah, that's right. Moving the topic of conversation back to me all of a sudden made me dizzy, but I tried my hardest to remain standing and propped myself against the wall.

"Then again, it'd be great if you could understand everything without needing me to explain any further."

"Nope, I don't get it at all."

"Given what I said, I'll need a child to inherit my ambitions. And if I require a child, there must be a father as well."

"Huh?"

"Do I really have to say something like 'Please be my husband' or 'I'd love to have your genes' to get you to understand me?"

I was speechless. I slumped to the floor as Senpai removed her Les Paul from her shoulder and closed in on me with a bewitching smile on her face—

"Eh? Ah, no, e-ehhhhhh?"

"Do you still think I'm kidding here, young man?"

But, because you.....!

Senpai knelt down in front of me and brought her face close to mine, then whispered in my ears.

"I've expressed my love for you several times already since we've met."

It felt like my innards had been doused in freezing alcohol. I searched through my memories and recalled the words Senpai had said to me previously. But, why? That was—

"You know, young man, this is the first time I've ever tasted such a complete defeat since I was born. The man I love was stolen away by the girl I love, and the girl I love is about to be eaten up by the man I love. You don't have to say anything, young man. I might just cover your lips up if I hear your voice right now."

At a distance where even a slight change in the angle of our faces would result in them coming into contact with each other, Senpai's lips were adorned with these words.

"I've long known for whom the narrow space in your heart is reserved for, but even so, I had no choice but to make my last stand. I'd rather not be born than give up my love."

"U-Urm—"

"So I tried my hardest to prevent you and Comrade Ebisawa from spending time alone together. I ended up succeeding in one area, but failing in another. Simple, isn't it? Do you now understand how hard I've been trying to stop you two from getting together?"

Senpai flashed me another calm smile. I should be the one trying my hardest to stop *you*.

She's serious. She's definitely not lying here. Her feelings for me are real.

"With this, the friendship and trust that once existed between us—our normal friendship—will burn and disappear into nothingness. It's a shame, but it can't be helped."

Disappear into nothingness.

The relationship between Senpai and I could no longer return to the

way it was before, as if nothing had happened.

Is this..... really it?

"That's right. This is what a confession of love means. What a scary thing it is. The rational fantasy people have about others is all gently taken away by love; and after, the only thing that remains, is blades. Hey, young man. Have you ever wondered why I have never once addressed you as my comrade, despite having forced you into my revolutionary army?"

I held my breath.

You're asking me that at a time like this?

"It's because there would come a day when you would turn into my dear enemy—I knew that the first time I saw you."

The first time we met. That was when Kagurazaka-senpai was sitting on the roof of this practice room—looking at me, captivating me. But I had already captivated Senpai's heart way, way before that.

"There's no need for you to reply to my feelings, young man. I do not wish to know."

"Why....."

"You're asking me why? I am but a woman in love if you strip the armor off my body. I do not wish to hear an answer that will sadden me. I'm already holding back my desire to hug you tightly and cry my heart out."

I saw no lies in the eyes that were staring intently at me.

"..... B-But, why..... me?"

Senpai pressed her finger gently against my lips and whisked away the rest of my words.

"Ninety percent of the world's happiness and misfortune would disappear if we could freely choose whom we fell in love with. And there would be no one who would be in a relationship. Isn't that right? Comrade Aihara."

I heard something scraping against the wall, so I turned my head around. At the same time, Senpai stood up in a flash, opened the door, and stretched her hand outside.

"There's no need for you to run. Come on in."

Said Senpai, with an amused expression on her face as she dragged a certain someone into the room. It was Chiaki. Her face became even redder when she crossed sights with me.

Did she hear our conversation? I tried to remember if I had closed the door after I had entered the room, but..... it was all hazy. No, but.....

I couldn't say anything. I crouched against the wall and saw Senpai hugging Chiaki as she said something to her. Where's Mafuyu? She's not here, right? That was what I was worried about—and it was the only thing I was clearly aware of amidst the chaos in my head.



Mafuyu finally appeared halfway into our lunch break. Seems like she made a trip to the infirmary first. But she spoke very little—perhaps because she detected the tense, explosive atmosphere lingering about the room.

My hand was totally unresponsive during our lunch break practice. Of course, there wasn't any way I wouldn't have known which way I was facing, or who I was exchanging glances with, but I was mostly just praying hard for the bell to ring as I played several notes wrong. Surprisingly though, it looked like everyone else had already reached their limit.

"Nao, enough is enough!" "You don't have to force yourself, young man—" "Stop playing if you are not in the mood to do so, Naomi!"

A moment of silence followed after that avalanche of words. I couldn't reply to anyone, or look anyone in the eyes. I just put my bass away.

When school ended, the only thing I said to Chiaki and Mafuyu was, "Sorry, urm, I'm a little..... I'm not attending practice today." And with that, I heaved my bass onto my back and left. My head was about to burst.

Chapter 7 - Toolbox, Concrete, Battlefield

Tetsurou wasn't around when I returned home. When I entered the house, it felt much colder indoors than outside, so I put on a duffel coat before spacing out on the sofa in the living room for a while. When my head finally cooled itself off, I thought back on everything Senpai had said to me earlier. I was now calm enough to recognize the bloodstained emotions that were hidden behind Kagurazaka-senpai's exaggerated speech.

When did it start?

When did Senpai start having feelings for me?

That was something I couldn't answer myself. Senpai has been telling me this the entire time, hasn't she? It started the moment we met.

"Therefore, I had already been paying attention to you for a long time already, young man."

"—I want you."

"I think I've already found the Paul McCartney that belongs only to me."

"It's really simple, young man. It's much simpler than what you're thinking inside your head."

Indeed. It was really simple.

I just never noticed it.

But I had no idea what to do, even after coming to that realization. The audition was just around the corner. No wait, Senpai said the live performance and audition had been arranged to prevent Mafuyu and me from spending time alone together. That's just her bringing her personal desires into work-related matters. But then again, that was just the sort of person she was.

I curled myself up on the sofa. My back hurt. I felt something snap; and that was when I realized I had crushed my bass underneath my body. My face turned pale as I quickly pulled the instrument out of its case. Shit, what the heck am I doing? Is it okay? I checked the four knobs, the bridge and the pickup—then heaved a sigh of relief when I realized nothing was broken.

I hugged the bass in my chest, then pulled my feet up on the sofa and curled myself up again. I shouldn't frustrate myself thinking about all these things at a time like this. Why did she bombard me with that lengthy speech of hers when the band is already in such a busy state? And what should I do if Mafuyu comes to know of this? I wasn't sure how well the two girls got along with each other. Senpai teased Mafuyu all the time, and it looked like Mafuyu wasn't too against it; but whenever they played together, the two girls attacked each other with timbres that sounded like two cobras going at each other's necks. You could call it feketerigó's style, but the difference in the tones of the melody was incredibly obvious when the two girls were playing together. My bass, however, was insufficient to carry the middle voice of the melody, and I often wished I could receive some assistance from the sounds of the synthesizer.

Hold on. Oi, now's not the time to be thinking about the band. This is just me running away from reality, isn't it? I knocked my fist against the body of my bass. The thing I should be worrying about at a time like this is—

Should I really not be worrying about the band at a time like this? Am I really okay?

I was disgusted by the various thoughts that were surfacing in my mind. The opposing guitar solos by Mafuyu and Senpai, along with the rhythmic phrases by Chiaki and me, reverberated from afar—and I was unable to stop them from awakening within my ears. I tried to reconstruct the song's missing strings and organs in my mind. Feketerigó lacked a fifth person, but ideas were already floating around in my head. They had come to me when I was listening to Mafuyu's solo rendition of <Happy Xmas>.

The blueprint and program were gradually taking shape.

How ironic. The music was being blocked out of my ears when we

were practicing in the room earlier, as I was being overly conscious of Senpai's gazes and words. But here I am, all alone by myself in the house, trying to think about the things Senpai had said to me with a cool head—and yet, the music keeps surging its way into my brain.

Simply put, I was subconsciously trying to find a place to hide.

The god of music will become angry if I keep using music as an excuse to run away from reality. But I had no choice but to do so. It was the only place I could run to.

I stood up from the sofa.

I went to my room, opened the cupboard, and took out an old synthesizer and a toolbox. Looks like I'll have to spend my night like this. But I guess working on machines is a much more productive way of spending the night compared to watching the clock tick while I hide away, distressed, in bed.

At the very least, it'll feel like I'm moving forward.



"Did you not get any sleep at all? The dark circles beneath your eyes are really something!"

Asked Chiaki, as she stared intently at my face. I nodded my head in response while trying my hardest to hold back a yawn. My voice was slightly hoarse.

It was morning at the station platform. The sky was still dark, as the sun hadn't come out yet, but the grayish concrete and Chiaki's checkered red skirt still stung my eyes, since I had stayed up all night.

"I couldn't sleep, so I worked till morning."

I removed the heavy cases from my shoulder and put them on the floor. In addition to my bass, I had also brought along the synthesizer. My hand almost snapped under the weight.

"Something must've happened yesterday, right? But Senpai refused to say anything."

Chiaki's eyes fixated on me, and gradually teared up as she put on a sorrowful expression. Two conflicting feelings flooded my heart.

Thank goodness she's not saying anything; but why doesn't she make things easier by voicing it all out? I had no idea if I was nodding or shaking my head.

"Why is no one willing to disclose anything....."

"Why's Chiaki being so gentle with her words?" I thought to myself. Why doesn't she just ask me forcibly to make me "spew it out quickly"? That was how she normally approached things like this. And that was what she did that night I was shaken up by Mafuyu and Yuri's <Kreutzer Sonata>.

But this isn't just my problem alone..... I can't tell Chiaki about it.

"Senpai said 'I love you, please embrace me' to you, right?"

I fell backwards and almost rolled onto the tracks.

"Nao's just too easy to read," laughed Chiaki shyly.

"So you did h-hear everything?"

She heard Senpai asking me to embrace her..... or rather, words that were along that line?

"I didn't hear that much, but I do know that Senpai has been in love with Nao right from the start."

"You knew about it this whole time?" I unconsciously started speaking in a polite manner.

"I should say everyone does. Even the girls in our class."

"Ehhhhhhhhhhh?"

I sat down next to the synthesizer—or maybe I fell flat on the concrete due to the shock. Come to think of it, it's not surprising that that's the case. Kagurazaka-senpai's feelings towards me were clear as day, right from the beginning.

"Forget it, I'm not surprised by this. It's typical for Nao to not realize something like this."

"Uhhh....."

I should just skip my lessons. I couldn't bring myself to face the rest of the world.

I suddenly came into contact with the synthesizer lying next to me.

But I can't do that.

Chiaki squat down opposite of me beside the synthesizer case. It felt like those powerful eyes of hers would capture me if I lifted my head up, so I continued staring at my hands instead.

"Just as I expected, Senpai's really strong."

Chiaki murmured.

"Though I can't understand why she chose to tell you with such bad timing."

That's something..... I don't understand as well. And I was in tatters because of that.

"..... That's something I can't do. I should've been shocked when I heard about this."

Right. Chiaki loved Senpai as well. There was no way she could act like nothing had happened.

"Urm, well, sorry."

"You have no right to apologize to me, so shut up."

I almost stumbled backwards onto the ground when Chiaki rebuffed me with a fierce smile on her face.

"I'm alright. I'm not as strong as Senpai is, so a weird mechanism in my mind will kick in and ask me to take it easy so that everything will remain the same."

"..... Isn't that being strong?"

"That's being weak. This is too hard for Nao to comprehend. You probably wouldn't understand anything even if I explained it to you."

I remained silent when Chiaki pointed her finger at my nose. That may very well be the case.

But there was one thing I was very certain of though: Chiaki's smile was lonelier than the cloudy dawn of early December.

"So, having skipped yesterday's practice, and having spent the whole night thinking, did you figure out what you're going to do?"

What I'm going to do? Where should I escape to? What should I do from now on?

I nodded my head slowly.

"..... I modified the flanger so that, in theory, it'll only take in the note values of the synthesizer."

"Hold on a second, what're you talking about?"

"The arrangements, of course."

I rapped on the synthesizer.

"I made this effects unit myself. It'll connect Senpai's and Mafuyu's guitars to the synthesizer, and will use the delayed effects as a backing. It'll also adjust the tones as well."

Chiaki lifted her hips slightly in a dumbfounded state. She remained speechless for a while.

"Wh..... What's this? That's what you did instead of sleeping?"

"I couldn't help it."

I could create some breathing space for myself if I directed all my attention to music; so I focused my consciousness and fingers on the soldering iron, the screwdrivers and the pliers, and buried myself in working on the modifications. I linked the effects unit, my bass and my computer to the synthesizer, and modified the code while repeatedly checking on the sounds.

And the answer I had come up with, was the black box placed in the back pocket of the synthesizer case.

Chiaki burst into a fit of laughter. She started out leaning forward while hugging her stomach, but when she heard my hesitant "Chiaki?", she covered her face with her hands and roared.

"..... Hold on, sorry..... Ahahahahaha, ha, Nao, you're really....."

"D-Did I say something strange?"

Chiaki shook her head as she held back her laughter, wiping away the tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Now I'm the one that looks like an idiot. If only I could be like you."

No, I just pushed the problem aside for now.....

I would still see Senpai at school, and I wasn't even sure what expression I should put on when facing her. But if it was music, it could gush into the silence and fill everything up, regardless of how

hopeless the situation was.

An announcement broadcasted the arrival of the train, and not long after, the train rushed past us, causing our hair to flutter in the air, and came to a stop in front of the platform—and with that, our conversation ended.



When we reached the school, we were surprised that the keys to the practice room couldn't be found in the key box. Someone had come earlier than us. Chiaki and I exchanged looks, then made our way down to the practice room located at the back of the school complex.

"How close were you and young man together? Something like this?"

"Eh? Ah, uh....."

"Did he place his arms around you? There's not much space there, right?"

"Naomi would not do something like that....."

"But it's cold outside, so he should've at least done this, right?"

"Yaa! Kyouko, stop!"

"What are you two doing....."

I was speechless when I opened the door. Kagurazaka-senpai and Mafuyu were sitting on a couple of tables that had been placed together, and Senpai's arm was wrapped around Mafuyu's waist. It looked like Senpai was sexually harassing Mafuyu.

"Geez, Senpai! Here I am, wondering to myself why you're here so early today!"

Chiaki pushed me aside and dashed into the room, then wrapped her arms around Senpai's neck to save Mafuyu. With her hair and uniform in a disheveled mess, Mafuyu hid behind Chiaki's back with a timid expression in her eyes.

"She and young man had their love talk on the water tower on the roof, so I'm grilling her for the details. As the president of the club, how can I not keep myself updated on things like this?"

"That has nothing to do with you being the president, right? And there's no need for you to remove your tie either."

"But everyone has forgotten that I love girls as well, so I wanted to use this opportunity to reestablish that fact."

It's okay for you to not reestablish that. Man, she's just..... I happened to briefly exchange glances with Mafuyu when she turned to face my direction. Her face was dyed in the colors of the setting sun. I averted my gaze on reflex.

In my mind, I had already decided what expression I would show, and what I would say, if I bumped into Senpai or Mafuyu. But it looks like it was all for nothing. Who would've expected to walk in on a display of sexual harassment in the practice room? I heaved a sigh and laid the cases I was carrying against the wall.

"You brought the synthesizer as well? Are you planning to do some arrangements? I was thinking of having a guitar showdown with Mafuyu. If so—"

Senpai leaned into me and looked over my shoulder at where my hands were. She rested her chin on my shoulder and pressed her chest tightly against my back, causing my body to freeze when I was about to take the synthesizer out of its case. My body was being stabbed by the painful glares of Mafuyu and Chiaki.

"Urm, well, I'm going to take the synthesizer out. P-Please move away."

No one said a word while I was connecting all the wires. Compared to the simple preparation of the instruments, the setup and tuning of the synthesizer and the effects unit was much more complicated.

When I passed one of the synthesizer's connecting wires over to Senpai, she put on a gentle smile and asked,

"Is this your answer?"

What? What did she mean by my answer?

My answer to the grand, unreserved, heart-bleeding confession Senpai made yesterday?

How's that possible? There wasn't a single word or thought inside

me that I could use to answer her. It was just that I had no idea what I had to do to get things back to normal—

Senpai plugged the wire into her Les Paul without waiting for my reply. I still couldn't bring myself to look at Mafuyu when I passed her her wire, so I fixed my gaze on the control panel of the effects unit instead. The bars on the display sprang to life, signaling that the two guitars were connected to my machine.

"Chiaki, you start off with the hi-hats. And Senpai, please join in during the second chorus. Mafuyu will perform solo for the first one."

The atmosphere of the room was silent, yet heated. I tapped the body of my bass and began the countdown. Chiaki started drumming faint beats that sounded like the minute echoes of the bell reverberating in the snowy sky.

I didn't tell them which song we were playing, but there was no need for me to. All we needed was one breath, and we were transported to the silent night of Christmas Eve, when the falling snow was about to cover everything—be it the soldiers, the trenches, the corpses or the weapons.

As though it was exhaling air out of its chest, Mafuyu's Stratocaster began to sing. *So this is Christmas, and what have you done, Another year over, a new one just begun.....*

<Happy Xmas>.

The remnants of the beautifully decorated lines of the main melody led the clear hymns of the organs and began to spread. I heard someone gulp. No one was touching the keyboard—everything was being done solely by the effects unit connected directly to Mafuyu's guitar. It had managed to locate the harmony between her guitar and my bass.

It felt just as though another Mafuyu was standing right there. But when I finally raised my head, the illusion disappeared in an instant without a trace. On the other side of me was Chiaki behind the drums, playing the sounds of the falling snow; and there was Mafuyu, whose eyes lowered as she wove out the song with her Stratocaster; and lastly, Kagurazaka-senpai was also there, with her Les Paul held tightly in her hands, looking at the shattered fragments of the illusion together with me.

I crossed sights with Senpai. Her eyes glittered like melting snow. She gave the pick in her fingers a swift flick in the direction of her Les Paul, overlapping the whispering melody of Mafuyu's Stratocaster with a simple and powerful stroke. I could hear the children singing the prayers of peace. *War is over, if you want it, war is over, now.....*

I could feel a slight difference in the tone. The bright strings exploded, and goosebumps ran through my body. Is it really just the four of us here? Is this the music being created by just the heart and limbs of feketerigó? Even though none of us were making any sounds, I could hear the voice of John Lennon and the chorus of the thousands of children; I could even hear the bombing of the jet fighters, the explosions of the incendiary bombs, the cries of the orphans and the furious roars of the people.

Chiaki's fill-in came bursting forth like lightning streaking through the night sky, and dragged us all into a rock tempo. The hymn broke free from John Lennon and the hands of the children. Supported by the wings of Kagurazaka-senpai and Mafuyu, it changed into a complex variation, spiraling at a dazzling speed as it climbed upwards. It dragged all the timbres of the synthesizer, shot its way into the sky of the Christmas night, and burst apart. If the entrance of my bass was even a split second late, the harmony would become distorted and fragmented, and would cover up the brilliant stars in the sky. The scattering particles of light were burning my body. I had to rely on the faint vibrations detectable only by the tips of my fingertips to continuously pump blood into the wings of feketerigó.

No one stopped.



In the end, the thing that prevented Senpai and Mafuyu from going on and on for eternity, was the bell that had come from far away.

When I finally stopped my fingers in exhaustion, the night sky faded away. Chiaki's beats slowed down considerably, and Senpai's and Mafuyu's guitars were restraining each other as they stopped their singing and counted the lingering echoes of their counterpart.

None of us spoke for a long time, even after the preparatory bell had finished ringing. The room was filled with a comforting numbness.

"—This has to be our best yet, right?"

Murmured Senpai, with heated breaths. Her eyes were wet.

"The auditions, the actual performance, and even places higher than that—it's all within sight, isn't it?"

I had no idea who started it, but we were all nodding our heads. The synthesizer and the effects unit as well—it felt like they were giving off a satisfied glow in reply.

As the volume of the amplifiers dropped step by step, the lingering heat finally slipped away from our bodies, and replacing it, was the air of reality on our skin.

It was a really scary scene.

When I think back on that, I realize the feketerigó then should've already been torn apart into pieces.

But even so, we were bound tightly together by the music and the machines I had hooked up. Despite the fact that I hadn't replied to Senpai's feelings yet, or my own thoughts.

And that was my first mistake.

Chapter 8 - Birthday

Before my eyes stood a large gate with spikes, several conifers, and tall metal railings that stretched to the sides. A large and elegant mansion, surrounded by a courtyard full of flowerbeds, stood deep inside the gated area.

I checked the time on my handphone. Four in the afternoon. Exactly our agreed time.

The last time I had visited the Ebisawa household was in the middle of summer. And the courtyard back then looked vastly different from what it looked like now. "I guess the flowers aren't around since it's December"—I thought to myself, as I stared at the lonely grassland. The two sharp dobermans lying down on the turf suddenly sat up, and came dashing in my direction just as I was about to reach for the intercom on the pillar. I retreated in fear.

The two dogs lay down on the other side of the gate and stared at me intently. They didn't bark or flash their teeth. Do they actually remember me?

I timidly walked forward with that thought in mind, but they stood up again.

"U-Urm, I'm not a strange person." For some reason, I began explaining myself to the dogs. "I'm just here to celebrate her birthday. Honest."

The dog on the right cocked its head suspiciously—do they somehow understand what I'm saying? It looked like the dog on the left was observing me. Do I really look that suspicious? It was an incredibly grand mansion; and I heard that Mafuyu typically dressed like a real lady at home, so I came in my suit to match myself to her. I took two steps towards the gate and squat down before the dogs as they continued to watch me.

"Do I look weird in this?"

"Your clothes, no. But your actions, yes."

"Whoa!"

I sprang up in response to the sudden voice beside me.

Standing next to me was a lady in a fitting light-beige pantsuit. She had come through the side door without me realizing. I hadn't even heard the sound of her footsteps.

Short hair, crisp facial contours, and an icy gaze. The cute pair of dolphin earrings on her ears felt out of place, and did nothing to tone down her sharpness. She was Matsumura Hitomi, the butler of the Ebisawa family that oversaw everything.

"Artur and Fricsay are pretty smart. They can distinguish the different attires worn by you and me," said Miss Matsumura, as she looked at the two dogs. "But sadly, they cannot comprehend human speech. It is pointless to seek their opinions."

"Ah, no, it's nothing....." Someone saw that. She saw me. That was really embarrassing. "S-Sorry, I didn't know you would be receiving me."

"No, I came out because I saw a suspicious person at the side of the gate."

She was as straightforward as ever.

"Ah, urm, it's been a while."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I stood up, dusted my knees and bowed. "Pardon me," said Miss Matsumura, as she walked swiftly towards me, stretching her arms out towards the collar of my coat. She adjusted my tie as I stood there flustered.

"Welcome. My mistress has been waiting for you."

Miss Matsumura opened the side door and walked into the courtyard while I was still rooted to the ground. She then patted the two dobermans on the head and said a few brief words, and the dogs obediently moved to the side of the flowerbed. After that, she finally granted me entry into the courtyard. That sequence of events seemed really abrupt. How very horrifying.

"Mistress is still in an exhausted state. She practiced the piano for a long time right after returning home from the audition yesterday,"

Said Miss Matsumura, who was walking three steps ahead of me. That statement made me flinch. I continued walking as I fixed my

gaze on my palms.

The audition yesterday. The burning sensation of the bass was still stuck to my hands, and was enough to make my body tremble. The metallic smell of the microphones, and the damp atmosphere that had been created by our breaths, still lingered around me. We had separated after giving it our all in that short period of time—yet, she continued practicing the piano even after reaching home?

"I hope Mr. Hikawa will offer your assistance in getting her to rest —"

"Naomi!"

A clear voice, one that sounded like the melting of the morning snow of winter, came towards me. I lifted my head.

It was a dazzling sight, be it the warm, golden hair or the pure white dress. Even her sapphire-blue eyes were sparkling. Mafuyu's body was bathed in light as she came flying towards me.

But she stopped in her tracks when she noticed my unreserved gaze.

"..... What is wrong?"

She tilted her head and looked at herself shyly.

"Eh, ah, no....."

I couldn't possibly tell her I had been bewitched by her looks.

"..... I don't get to see you in this type of attire that often."

I hastily said those untruthful words. I had already seen Mafuyu in such elegant attire several times—on CD covers, in magazines and on TV. It was nothing new.

"Naomi is the one that is not in your typical attire."

Mafuyu tilted her head and took a good look at me from head to toe.

"It does not really suit you."

That was a huge blow. I almost slumped down onto the grass.

"Ah, s-sorry. Urm, you look much better than you did the time you attended Papa's concert."

"Mistress, you are not making it any better by saying that."

Miss Matsumura's words dealt the depressed me the critical blow.

"Mistress, it would be better if you were more careful with your words."

You're in no position to say that!



Stepping into the Ebisawa mansion for the very first time, I noticed that the interior design of the house wasn't as impressive as the outside of the house had suggested. I had expected the house to be covered with woolen carpets, fur as deep as the ankles, chandeliers larger than a table, or Victorian vases big enough for a child to hide inside. But the corridors and stairs were a huge letdown compared to what I had imagined in my mind. It felt like I was in a brand new art museum—a vast whiteness filled my eyes, and made me more and more restless. Additionally, the temperature indoors was almost as cold as the temperature outside.

Finally, I was led to a room that was about twice the size of a classroom, and filled with curtains and woolen carpets in warm colors. To my left was a grand piano with its lid raised, and on the walls was a classy sound system that would make even Tetsuro envious. The heater in the room had already been switched on, so I could finally remove my coat.

"..... Is this a music salon? Does your family frequently hold family concerts?"

"No, this is my practice room."

I almost dropped the present in my hands. That room alone was almost as big as my house.

While I was looking around the room in a fluster, Miss Matsumura swiftly took my coat from my hands and hung it on the wall. She then led me to a chair and motioned for me to sit. Next to the small, single-legged round desk was a stylish cream-colored tea table.

After Miss Matsumura left the room, Mafuyu sat down in the chair diagonally in front of me and said softly,

"..... Thank you..... for coming over today....."

"M-Mmm."

I wanted to say something cool, but I couldn't think of anything to say despite having contemplated my words for a solid five seconds with my fingers crossed.

It can't be helped. I brought up an uninteresting topic: yesterday's event.

"Were you okay yesterday? You couldn't even stand properly after the audition."

The audition was held at the scheduled venue, a club house; but unlike Bright, there was no smell of sweat. It was an avant-garde place, and was so spacious that my legs were wobbling slightly just from standing on the stage. The other bands leaned more towards disco-style music; and there were even dance groups auditioning as well. Naturally, we were one of the youngest groups there. As we were scheduled to hit the stage last, we had to listen to the high quality performances of the other groups as we trembled behind the stage.

Senpai, however, was completely unfazed. "We'll score a landslide victory if they factor in looks as well," said Senpai. How very confident of her. But when I saw how exhausted Mafuyu was at the end of our performance, my worry about whether we had passed the audition or not was thrown out the window.

"Urm, is the solo for <Happy Xmas> too long? Mafuyu was playing by yourself for a full minute, and it looked like you were breathless at the end of that....."

Mafuyu took a deep breath and shook her head immediately.

"..... I will work hard to last through the whole song."

No, please don't. A chill went down my spine as I recalled what Furukawa had said—the thing about the burden on her wrist, and how it was inconceivable for her to last through the whole performance.

"And I heard you practiced the piano after you returned home? Miss Matsumura—"

"That's because!" Mafuyu raised her voice to prevent me from saying anything further. "..... Because you were coming today. I would not skip my practice just because I was tired from the audition."

Me? What did she mean when she said it was because I was coming?

"Whatever! It is my birthday today, so stop talking about things like that!"

"Ah, s-sorry."

Right. Celebrating her birthday alone by ourselves is a rare occasion, so I'll have to get back on topic.

"Urm, congratulations..... How old are you?"

"Sixteen, of course."

Right. What sort of idiotic question am I asking her? Mafuyu quickly continued on, perhaps because she noticed how depressed I was.

"When is Naomi's birthday?"

"Fourth of April." I couldn't recall ever celebrating it together with anyone. In fact, there were even times I had forgotten my own birthday. After all, it did take place during the spring holidays.

"No one celebrates it together with you?"

"Hmm. Maybe when I was still little. My parents might've bought me a cake or something. But they split up before I was in elementary school."

"Ah..... s-sorry."

Mafuyu covered her mouth, and her expression became sullen. I quickly shook my hands.

"It's nothing, I don't mind. That's the way Tetsurou is anyway—it's like a joke to me now."

"Let's also celebrate Naomi's birthday together then."

"What are we celebrating here? A birthday that's eight months late.....?" I laughed. Then again, I said something similar to Chiaki as well, and was scolded by her for that.

"..... We will celebrate Naomi being the same age as I am. Naomi was already sixteen when we first met, right?"

I shut my mouth and looked at Mafuyu's face.

The day we first met. Does she remember even the date? The spring holidays marked our beginning. And at the junkyard hidden between the mountains next to the sea, where time ground to a halt, Ravel's piano concerto had brought us together. And here we are now, with time flying by.

Our hearts were stirred up by the memories. As we lowered our heads shyly after briefly exchanging a glance, we were suddenly interrupted by knocks on the door.

"I am here with some snacks and tea."

It was Miss Matsumura. She pushed a tall, sculptured, two-level metal trolley into the room, and on the trolley, was a long teapot, a basket full of freshly baked madeleines and an overflowing amount of soufflés.

"Wow..... smells great."

"The slightly deformed madeleines on this side were made by Mistress."

"Hitomi!"

Mafuyu stood up with a teary expression on her face and quickly turned towards me with her face flushed red.

"I-it is because I have never once stepped into the kitchen!"

Yeah, since she's a professional pianist, it'd be troublesome if anything happened to her fingers.

"I could not stand to watch on any longer, so I made the remaining half of the madeleines and all the soufflés."

"Geez! Just go away, Hitomi! I will brew the tea!"

A blushing Mafuyu stood up and chased Miss Matsumura out of the room.

"Well then, I will be in the office on the first floor. Please scream if anything should happen. Mr. Hikawa is a man after all."

"Whatever! Get out now!"

The two of us were alone again. "Well, urm....." Mafuyu began serving me tea despite how flustered she was. I was incredibly nervous as well. In the basket were what was said to be a few madeleines made by Mafuyu. Indeed. Four out of eight of the madeleines had a rather peculiar shape to them.

"Urm, w-well, uhh, but....."

Mafuyu shook her hands in panic when she saw me grabbing one of the cakes she made.

"You do not have to deliberately choose that! Urm, I do wish for you to try it, but!"

"Don't worry, it's delicious. Really delicious."

Here I was, drinking afternoon tea with a dressed-up Mafuyu, in a rather out-of-this-world room (that was her's to boot)—how could anyone possibly remain calm in that situation? But having suffered that preemptive embarrassment earlier, I somehow managed to do just that. Moreover, I wasn't lying when I said the madeleines were delicious.

"I'm hopeless when it comes to desserts. And no one would eat them anyway, since Tetsurou's boozing all day."

"That is the only thing I know how to do. Hitomi just taught me today."

"The kitchen should be a mess....."

"It is not!"

No, sorry, I was just joking, really! Don't cry!

"You are really good at cooking, so you would never understand the feelings of those that are horrible at it."

Mumbled Mafuyu, as she took a huge bite of the soufflé. What does she mean by that?

"You want to learn how to cook? But nothing good would come of that, you know? All you would get is people ordering you around."

Mafuyu lifted her eyes to look at me. She nodded.

"..... Because Kyouko cannot cook."

"—Eh?"

My heart skipped a beat. Kagurazaka-senpai? Why did she bring her up?

"She can do just about everything, but she cannot cook. There is nothing else I can beat her at."

That means..... Wait, what does she mean by that? Beat her?

"Kyouko....." Mafuyu's face was burning red, and her voice rose all of a sudden. She whimpered and continued, "S-she should not be able to make desserts for you."

Eh? Ah, no, hold on. Mafuyu was staring at me with a serious look in her eyes. I swallowed the words that were at the edge of my mouth. Does Mafuyu know about that? About the things Kagurazaka-senpai had said to me.

If that's the case, I'll have to express myself properly to Mafuyu right now. With Mafuyu around, my feelings for Senpai—no wait, Mafuyu hasn't asked me anything about that yet, so it'd be weird if I just suddenly brought it up.

My brain was about to melt. And the question that came out of my mouth at a time like that, was something so incredibly natural and obvious, it sounded silly.

"..... But Mafuyu still has the piano, no?"

Mafuyu's eyes opened wide. She then directed her gaze at the teacups.

"But, if it is only the piano....."

"As long as I can listen to you play the piano. Ah, no, the madeleines are great too. Mmm."

Mafuyu glared at me as she pouted her lips, causing me to swallow the rest of my words down my throat along with some tea.

Did I say something to upset her? As I was stuffing my fifth madeleine into my mouth while still in a clueless state, Mafuyu stood up all of a sudden.

She wiped her hands carefully with a wet towel, then turned towards me.

"This is my birthday present for you."

"Eh?"

"I will give it to you right now."

I froze on the spot, still holding the half-eaten madeleine in my hand; it looked as though I was posing for a CD cover. Mafuyu's white figure floated away from me. Her pure-white dress, as well as her long maroon hair, could be seen behind the gloomy piano that had its black wings spread out wide. It felt like time would stop forever. Mafuyu's sapphire-blue eyes were fixated on me.

"..... Because we had run out of time back then."

It felt like Mafuyu's voice had woken me up from a long dream.

"I will play anything Naomi wants to hear."

I didn't even notice the madeleine dropping into my teacup.

Mafuyu was about to play the piano for me. For me—and only me.

A present that she couldn't give me if I didn't come to her house—was she referring to this?

Crap. I was clueless about my situation. What expression do I have on my face? Am I about to stand up? Am I wearing a weird smile? A strange, warm sensation came gushing up from beneath my abdomen, making me feel uneasy. Calm down. I tried my hardest to force myself back into my chair.

"And the first piece will be?"

"U-Urm....."

My voice shrunk back inside me, so I cleared my throat. What should I do? Is any piece fine? Really? Then I should choose something she hasn't released in an album. If only an orchestra were here, then I could get her to play all of the Brandenburg concertos. Or perhaps I should have her play Mozart's <Piano Concerto No. 24> in C minor. No, that's not quite possible, but how about <Variations and Fugue on a Theme> by Handel? Is she good with the works from the early Romantic Era? Would the organ works by Bach be better? How about—

I came close to voicing my greedy desire a few times.

But only one answer remained in my mouth.

The first song I want Mafuyu to play for me has to be none other than this.

"..... Beethoven's Op. 81a."

Mafuyu flashed a faint smile when she heard my answer. But in the next instant, she turned to face the eighty-eight black and white keys and immersed her fingers, her wrists, her bones and her soul deep in that icy monochrome world.

Her eyelashes lowered, and her shoulders swayed. I couldn't help but stand up. I could see Mafuyu's slender fingers pressing down on the keys of the triad that symbolized goodbye.

Next came the whispers of the adagio.

Beethoven's Op. 81a. Piano Sonata No. 26 in E \flat major, also known as the <Les Adieux sonata>.

It was the first movement, and the friend had just left riding on the allegro. With the train disappearing in the morning mist, the footsteps sounded so clear, but were filled with an indescribable sadness at the same time.

Why hasn't Mafuyu recorded this song before? I remember her saying in a certain interview that this is her favorite piece out of all of Beethoven's pieces.

Is it because this is a song of goodbye? Does the story woven by Beethoven appear clearly before her eyes each time she plays this song, bringing her pain as a result? Or does she fear her fingers will stop before she can even reach the final movement?

Regardless—

The reasons didn't matter anymore.

Mafuyu was playing <Les Adieux sonata>. The emotional andante wandered about aimlessly amid the grey gloominess as it counted the number of days without its other half. And as it sought out the exit like a ray of light, the pitch gradually increased—then, was finally released. The left and right hands had been seeking each other out since the very beginning, and when their sounds clashed, they broke into a dance of happiness celebrating their reunion. What a clear and simple, yet powerful, harmony.

When I closed my eyes, it felt like the inside of my face was about to ignite.

Can the sound of the piano really be so intense that it feels like it could sear my skin, and yet, at the same time, be as sweet as an intoxicating rain of liquor? Strange. This isn't the familiar sound of the instrument I have heard thousands of times. Is this really the piano? Could it be the chirps of the magical bird that resulted from the painful caress of Mafuyu's fingers? I moved myself forward unconsciously, attracted by the luster of the black wing.

Mafuyu hammered the final chord of the E \flat major, and waited until the final sound permeated the air before lifting her fingers.

"..... Naomi?"

I jumped in surprise when she called my name. Somehow, I had ended up leaning on the side of the piano, my eyes fixed on the keys.

"..... Ah."

"Is there anything wrong? Do you not like it?"

I shook my head hard.

"How can that be? Just..... How do I put it? In any case, it was amazing. Urm....."

I couldn't speak. The music critic genes I had inherited were laid bare for Mafuyu to see.

"What will the next song be?"

"Ummm....." It felt like my heart was right next to my ear—I could hear it thumping away.

"W-What should I choose? I guess Bach would be the best. Well then, urm, <Partita No.2> in C minor."

Mafuyu nodded. Each time I uttered the title of a song, Mafuyu would delve back into that mysterious, pitch-black-and-ivory world. It was a little saddening, but the songs she wove there captivated me again and again, preventing me from escaping. It started off with a viscous question, and was followed by a confirmation in what felt like a repeated stampede on the frost and snow, then ended with a fugue that expanded outwards in the brilliant sky and beneath the

water.

Ahh, that's—

It was that unique piano. I finally understood.

It was that piano. There was no mistake. During the fugue, I could hear the sound of the tides drifting in my direction, and the sound of the gentle breeze rustling the leaves. There was also the sound of the rusty bicycle wheel spinning in the air, and the drops of rain pattering on the door of the fridge.

<The Well-Tempered Clavier>, <The Art of Fugue>, <The Musical Offering> and <Goldberg Variations>. I could no longer differentiate which of those songs had been requested by me, and which of them had been played by Mafuyu on a whim.

Mafuyu, who had been playing the piano silently the entire time, finally rested her hands on her knees and exhaled a heated breath towards the ceiling. The drops of sweat on her face glistened in the light.

Her pose made it look like she was praying. I hesitated, wondering if I should call out to her.

Was it because of the exhaustion from those excessive practices? During the final stretches of her playing, it looked like Mafuyu was twisting her skinny body. It was painful to watch.

A light smile appeared at the edges of Mafuyu's mouth. She slowly fixed her gaze on my face.

"Hey, that piano."

Mafuyu's gaze blurred when I spoke, as though she were in a dream-like trance. She tilted her head slightly.

"Is that..... the piano at the junkyard?"

Mafuyu leaned towards me happily.

"You can tell just by listening?"

"Yeah, because....." It was impossible for those sounds to come from anything else. I had already heard it twice, and there was no way I would ever forget it.

But Mafuyu shook her head.

"..... That piano was Mama's."

I took in a deep breath.

"Hitomi secretly moved it to the villa for me, but Papa saw it when he came back to Japan, and threw it away in anger. But I still visited Mama's piano quite a number of times."

And that was how we had met. At the department store located between the valleys at the ends of the world.

"I could not go there often after I entered high school; and the piano could no longer be played anyway, because of the damages sustained from the rain. So in the end, I gave up. But Papa bought this piano for me not too long ago."

Ebichiri did?

"The way I press the keys is really similar to the way Mama did. Mama's piano had been custom made, with the keys being made really light, so Papa asked Yamaha to make an exact replica of her piano for me."

Mafuyu lovingly caressed the golden "Yamaha" label carved above the keys.

"I really do not understand what is going on in his head. He is the one that threw it away; yet, he ordered an exact copy to be made."

I thought I could understand it a little.

Perhaps he granted his forgiveness some time ago—not to his wife, who separated from him, but to himself.

"It is inconceivable. I never thought I would get it back."

The same piano as her mother. The item Mafuyu yearned to get back.

It was probably because it was Mafuyu's heartfelt desire.

"..... Magic exists there, you know?"

"Magic? What?"

Mafuyu locked her widened round eyes on me and asked me that seriously. I all of a sudden became shy.

"Urm, nothing."

"How can that possibly be? Explain it to me properly."

Mafuyu's eyes turned serious all of a sudden, and after she pressed me further, I was forced to tell her the truth—about the name I had secretly come up with for that junkyard.

"The Department Store of Hearts' Desires."

"..... Why did you name it that?"

"Why do you want to know....."

"Because it is a good name."

I couldn't help but turn my gaze away. I was happy she praised me, but sadly, the name had come from somewhere else.

"Have you ever heard of the novel <Norstrilia>?"

Mafuyu shook her head. Right. It's not a novel someone would typically come across.

"That name is the name of a special place in that novel. If you can find your heartfelt desire, that place will grant that desire for you, no matter what it is."

I had read the book when I was young, so I couldn't quite remember the details—just a few names here and there. But I did remember that it was a story about a youngster named Rod McBan, who had finally gotten his hands on a collector's postage stamp and returned home.

"Did you give it that name because you are always getting your spare parts from there?"

"Mmm, you're not wrong. I can fix almost anything as long as I make a trip to that place."

Mafuyu's eyes sparkled as she looked at me. I could almost hear the howl of the wind inside my memories.

"Well then, did you find it? Your real desire."

My heartfelt desire.

"..... I don't know."

"I have already found mine."

Mafuyu's desire?

Neither of us could ask the questions that should've followed after.

Because that was the place where we had met. But that fairy-tale way of thinking was purely wishful. Mafuyu's cheeks burned like the flames of a heater just from us briefly exchanging glances. If I had said something, perhaps the distance between Mafuyu's hands—whose fingers were gently resting on the keys—and my hands—that had wings sprouting from them—would've gradually become zero—

A shadow appeared on Mafuyu's face.

Are those eyes, that look like the deep sea, trying to tell me something? It felt like my heart was being squeezed by something when I was about to ask her a question, so I heaved a slow sigh instead.

"..... Well"—my dry sigh finally turned into speech—"I have a present..... I'd like to give you as well."

For a moment, I thought Mafuyu would burst into tears. But she just lowered her eyes and gently nodded her head instead. I almost apologized to her.

I grabbed the bag underneath my coat.

When I passed Mafuyu the wrapped present, I could see her watery eyes alternating between the ribbon and my hands.

"..... Can I open this?"

"Mmm. Urm, well, I'd like to explain the present a little as well."

Mafuyu shot me a surprised look, then untied the ribbon and removed the wrapping. Her eyes widened when she saw the crimson jacket of the record.

"Sorry about how worn out it is; I could only get my hands on one secondhand."

"It is okay..... I have never once listened to a full album of The Beatles."

"Do you have a player?"

Mafuyu nodded and led me to the sound system at the side of the room. She placed the round, black record on an old but solid player and lowered the needle.

Cheers and applause emanated from the speakers as we sat down on the sofa. Mafuyu placed the jacket of the album, which had a **wildly colourful group image** printed on it, on her knees. While looking at the jacket, she asked,

"Is this a live recording of a concert?"

"Nope. It's a studio recording."

The cheers were broken apart by the resolute beats and guitar riffs.

"Back then, The Beatles were already worldwide superstars. Everywhere they went, they were surrounded by ardent fans and chased around by the media. But because of all that attention, they gradually became weary of the thought of holding concerts."

Paul McCartney finally began singing, and started crooning about the fictitious story of the roots of their music.

"But they still loved performing live, which was expected since they were a rock band, so they created a fictitious band, and conceived a setting to record a live performance of that very band. And thus, this record was created."

—Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

A fictitious name entrusted with their dreams. It was the title of the album, as well as the title of the first and last track.

Mafuyu was sitting next to me silently, sinking her body into the sofa as she listened to Ringo Starr's voice, which had followed Paul's. The mic was then passed on to John Lennon. The brass section, the orchestra, the harpsichord, the sitar..... All the lively instruments that couldn't possibly be accommodated on a real stage, had appeared on that fictitious stage and inside that rock music.

I had left my seat only once—to flip the record over to the "B" side. But it didn't seem like Mafuyu had even noticed I had gotten up.

The live performance was about to end. Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band had substituted their closing speech with a song, an impromptu performance. But sadly, it was about time for us to part.....

The song ended. The thundering cheers gradually died down, and

were quietly replaced by the strums of the guitar, and a piano that came in shortly after.

For some reason, I always tear up when it reaches this part. And to this very day, I still don't understand why the intro touches me so much.

Encore, **<A Day in the Life>**.

I felt the warmth of a body on the back of my hand.

It was Mafuyu's fingers. She was playing the same melody as the piano in the song.

After a while, the orchestra entered its final crescendo. All the instruments started playing from their lowest note to their highest note, and ignored the clashing and grazing of the disharmony. The piece kept climbing and scaling upwards in its search for the light, prying even the clouds apart—

Shatter.

The harmony of the simultaneous strikes of the three pianos created a buzzing echo, and the shattered fragments scattered across the surface of the sea.

Our hands folded together as we listened to the song's dying moments. Even though the sounds of the piano had been totally sucked up by the air, the record hadn't ended yet; I could clearly hear the sound of footsteps, and of a chair scraping against the floor.

Then, the silence was suddenly interrupted—not by a song or by our words, but by a rewinding sound. Mafuyu's hair flinched. She grabbed my hand tightly.

"..... W-What is this?"

A melody lingering on the brink of existence, with a few voices playing in reverse at the same time. The short verse repeated itself endlessly.

"Urm, this is called **<Sgt Pepper's Inner Groove>**. The inner groove of the record forms a repeating loop, so the record will continue playing if you don't stop the player."

Thank god the record player in Mafuyu's house is an older model—

I secretly heaved a sigh of relief. I also silently thanked Tetsurou for finding another copy of the UK version of the vinyl record.

The records released by the US and Japan either ignored that feature, or just didn't repeat properly. And of course, in the CD version, the track simply faded away.

That was why it had to be the UK version of the vinyl record.

"Why did they design it like this?"

Asked Mafuyu, as she looked at the record uneasily.

It felt a little embarrassing to reply to her with an answer prepared in advance. No no, then what was the point of asking Tetsurou to find the record in the first place? I have to answer her properly.

My gaze fell onto the jacket of the album—onto John, who was carrying a horn and wearing a military band uniform. I chose the appropriate words slowly.

"Urm, it was probably a prank. The Beatles used to love teasing their audience. They were probably saying 'It's over,' but....."

I moved my eyes onto Mafuyu's tiny hand that was resting on top of mine.

"Perhaps they didn't actually want that fictitious concert to end. That's what I think anyway."

I could feel Mafuyu's large eyes fixating on my cheeks.

"That's why I chose to give Mafuyu this record for your birthday present."

The concert will never end if she doesn't lift the needle.

A dream that could never be fulfilled in reality.

When I was finished explaining, I snuck a peek at Mafuyu. Our eyes met; and both of us lowered our gaze shyly, onto our overlapping hands.



Mafuyu let out an inaudible shriek and stood up with her face flushed red. She hid her right hand—that was just on top of mine not

too long ago—behind her back and shook her head as she stepped back.

"Sorry, urm....."

"I will switch the player off."

Mafuyu ran to the sound system, with the hem of her dress fluttering around her, and lifted the needle. <Inner Groove> came to a startling halt, destroying eternity. An awkward silence lingered between the two of us. Mafuyu slotted the record back in its jacket, then returned to the sofa with the album hugged in her chest. I felt a little uneasy. Did I make her happy?

"I thought..... I heard something just now."

I tilted my head.

"Well, I thought I heard an incredibly high-pitched sound prior to the repeating voices."

I was dumbfounded.

"..... R-Really? Well, you're not wrong."

That was one of their childish pranks. The Beatles had inserted a high-frequency tone that was supposed to only be audible to dogs right before the <Inner Groove>. She could hear that?

"Dogs? Why?"

"No idea. A joke of some sort, perhaps."

"Ah, perhaps because it is Constable Pepper's band? That might be the dog whistle that summons the police dog."

Mafuyu's voice sounded a little hoarse. She was looking at the album intently as she flipped it around. I see, that never occurred to me. No wait, he's a sergeant, not a constable, yeah?

"There's plenty of other fun stuff on the cover as well. You can even see Sergeant Pepper's arm badge and insignia. And there's also that fake beard."

When I pulled out the cover, a simple yet colourful print came into Mafuyu's view, and a child-like smile appeared on her face. She must be really happy, right?

After a while, Mafuyu slid the cover back in place and hugged the

record tightly in her chest again.

"..... I will"

"Eh?"

"I will listen to it again later. Over and over."

"Ah, oh, mmm."

"Thank you. I am happy, really happy. Really really happy."

"M-Mmm, I know."

Mafuyu hugged the record and sat down next to me.

She was even closer to me than before, with her shoulder touching mine. I couldn't shift the angle of my upper body.

Thank goodness, she looks elated. Having vacillated between nervousness and calm repeatedly, it felt like the bones in my body were about to shatter.

"Naomi, why....."

Mafuyu was murmuring next to my ears, so the only thing I could do was turn my face slightly towards her.

"Why do you always know what I want in an instant when it comes to music?"

I-is that right?

"But not understand the thing that I really desire?"

I can't look, or I'll get sucked in by her—despite thinking that, I still turned my head towards Mafuyu. I was immediately held captive by Mafuyu's deep-blue eyes, which were only about fifteen centimeters away from me.

What she really desires, huh.

Why? I knew that all I had to do was convert my answer into words, but I was unable to make a sound. I lacked the courage. It was just the end of the music, but yet, I couldn't breathe.

I only had to convert it into words.

But for some reason, Kagurazaka-senpai's words appeared in my mind at that very moment.

"This is what a confession of love means. What a scary thing it is."

"The rational fantasy people have about others is all gently taken away by love."

It felt horrible just imagining no longer being able to sit next to Mafuyu like I normally would, if I were to let it all out. Isn't that something really scary?

If I choose to remain silent, we can keep interacting with each other, like what we're doing right now. But if I confess, all that will be left between us, is blades.

Moreover, I haven't given Senpai a proper reply yet. She did say she didn't want to hear my answer, but that isn't the point. There was no way I could say the same thing to another girl without having replied to Senpai first. I just couldn't do it.

No, but I have to. Mafuyu's eyes were clouded over by a sorrowful expression. I don't want to see her wear that kind of expression anymore. I have to say it.

But just as I was about to open my mouth—

A shrill guitar riff came between Mafuyu and me. I sprang up in shock and accidentally flung Mafuyu's hand away. She prevented herself from falling by grabbing onto the sofa.

"Ah, s-sorry!"

It was my handphone. And the ringtone of the incoming call—
<Revolution>—meant—

I remembered stuffing my phone into my coat pocket, so I rushed to the wall.

"Hi, young man. Sorry for interrupting, but I called you because I have something important to tell you. But then again, I would've made this call anyway."

On the other side of the phone was Kagurazaka-senpai musing away. I pressed my hand against the wall and lowered my head in dejection.

"Anything important?"

I could feel Mafuyu's eyes behind me. For some reason, I unconsciously turned my body to block my phone from her sight and lowered my voice.

"I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you prefer first?"

I let out a sigh. I had heard that question from her countless times since I first met her.

"Anything's fine. It should roughly be the same thing anyway."

Senpai went silent for a while. Did I manage to surprise her? Damn, this feels great.

"You are gradually metamorphosing into a man of my preferences. Why is that so? You'd be a regular suave guy if you lost that problem of your denseness. Stop making my heart skip a beat."

"No no, what are you talking about?" Mafuyu's right behind me! I doubt she can hear our conversation through the phone, but she does possess a pair of incredibly sharp ears!

"In any case, it's exactly as you said. We passed the auditions. I never expected the results to be out so soon. I hope it'll be the best Christmas Eve yet."

I adjusted my grip on the phone.

We passed the audition. The good and bad news.

"..... H-How's this....." I tried my best to hold on. "So what's the bad news?"

"Your voice is trembling. That's really cute as well," Senpai giggled. "Well then, please pass this message on to Comrade Ebisawa behind you: if you two step over the line today, that means I will have kissed young man as well, though indirectly. Please remember that."

"Kyouko~!" Mafuyu let out a furious shriek. It looked like she actually heard us. The call disconnected. Mafuyu hammered my back really hard; her face and ears were burning red. I was at my limit as well, so I couldn't look Mafuyu properly in the face.

Because of that, I ended up missing the chance to say those important words.

And that was my second mistake.

Chapter 9 - Spring, Glass Hand

I returned home at about eight at night; and when I opened the front door, I was immediately greeted by an earthshaking <Tarantelle> by Chopin, coming from the depths of the dark corridor, and Tetsurou's weird singing.

"Meat, meat, veggies! Meat, meat, veggies!"

"What the hell are you doing....."

Tetsurou was circling the steaming hot pot and dancing like a lunatic with a bowl and a pair of chopsticks in his hands. His face turned green when he noticed my presence.

"Hah? Hold on, Nao. Why are you back home?"

"Well, I do currently reside in this house." I spoke very politely for some unknown reason.

I turned the CD off and glanced at the contents inside the pot. Meat was bubbling inside the gas stove hot pot, and next to the pot, was what looked like a plate of really expensive marbled beef.

"No, you see, I thought Nao wouldn't be home, so I thought I should enjoy the only dish I know how to cook."

"What's the price of this beef? Per gram."

"Six hundr..... Hold on, Nao! I'm sorry!"

"Do you know about our financial situation right now?" I had the urge to slam Tetsurou's head into the hot pot, but changed my mind at the very last moment.

"It's important to reward yourself occasionally, Nao."

"But Tetsurou has done nothing worth rewarding, have you!? And all you have here is meat and beer—you can't even call this a dinner!"

"Yeah, that's why I was doing the veggie dance that I invented. Thirty minutes of that will net you about sixty lemons' worth of vitamins."

I really wanted to grab some cabbage or tomatoes from the fridge and stuff them in his mouth, but that would've been a waste. Forget it.

"You want some? It's everyone's favourite Tetsurou-styled sukiyaki, made personally by yours truly—though there's only beer, soy sauce and meat! Simple but delicious!"

"Nope. I'm not hungry....."

I weakly removed my coat. It wasn't just because of the snacks I had in the afternoon; a lot of things had happened—the conversation with Mafuyu, listening to Mafuyu play the piano..... I was already filled right up to my chest.

And then there was that beautiful finish from Kagurazaka-senpai. I let out a sigh, then removed my tie and sank myself into the sofa.

The four of us would be spending Christmas Eve together. That was final.

But I was truly happy about that. We had reached another stage that was even higher. And it was just like Senpai had said: this time, it would be a night without the support of the audience. We couldn't afford to make the slightest mistake.

But the problem was—can we really get through the practices and make it onto the stage with our current chaotic states of mind? It wasn't like Kagurazaka-senpai had let it all go or something. Instead, it felt more like she was impervious to that explosive confession she had made..... and it was the three people around her that had become way more fidgety instead.

Does Mafuyu know about the confession Senpai made? Ahhh, I should've asked her earlier today—no, that was impossible. There was no way I could ask her that in that situation.

The problem was, I did like Kagurazaka-senpai as well. No, I mean, well, I've been under her care this whole time. She was always there to push me from behind, and always led us forward in a very dependable manner. I was happy about Senpai's feelings for me, but there was no way I could reciprocate those feelings, as Mafuyu was the one in my heart.

I did want to tell Senpai that, but she avoided it simply with a "I

understand, you don't have to take it to heart" look in her eyes. We had managed to make it through the auditions despite that ambiguous situation we were in though. Kind of impressive, if I must say.

No—.

I can't drag this on any longer.

I couldn't say it because I was so damn useless.

Today too. I couldn't tell Mafuyu the things that mattered. Why did I even visit her house in the first place? That was just shameful of me.

"So you ran back here just like that? There's a sofa there, no? All you had to do was to push her down onto the sofa, right? You wuss."

"No, that's something..... What the heck are you talking about, Tetsurou!?"

I threw a cushion at Tetsurou, who was walking into the living room with a can of beer in his hand.

"That marbled beef was just heavenly. And now I'll have these strawberry-flavoured reports as my dessert. Which hand did you place on her shoulder?"

"Please, just get back to your work."

Tetsurou grumbled unhappily as he opened his laptop and sat on the sofa opposite of me. I went to my room to change into more comfortable clothes, as my shoulders were sore because I wasn't used to wearing a suit.

There, I remembered the cassette tape in the pocket of my suit. Mafuyu had passed it on to me right when I was about to leave her house. It was her final present for the day.

Then again, I couldn't listen to it in my room. Can't be helped, I'll have to go back to the living room.

"Tetsurou, mind if I play a cassette tape?"

"Oh man, did you actually record the mushy words you two said?"

"Shut the hell up and get the hell away!"

There was nothing soft next to me, so I grabbed a DVD case and

threw it in Tetsurou's direction without hesitation.

I returned to the sofa after pressing the play button. Some background noise arose; then, the voice of the producer or recorder or something. Next came the lively melody of the violin, and supporting it, was a simple arpeggio from the piano.

Tetsurou lifted his head above the screen of his laptop.

"..... You got your hands on the sample tape?"

"Mmm."

"I see. Hmm, she's playing on par with Julien Flaubert even though she hasn't played in a long time."

Regardless of how useless he was, he was still a music critic, so he could tell straight away.

It was Mafuyu's comeback album that she had performed together with Yuri. She had passed me the sample tape. It was Beethoven's **<Violin Sonata No. 5 in F Major>**, better known as **<Spring>**. The piece is typically paired with **<Kreutzer>**; and together, they're actually the most commonly seen combination of pieces. Given that, both of those pieces will probably be included in the album.

"Rather than this smooth-flowing piece though, I very much prefer to listen to the intense arguments between the two instruments in **<Kreutzer>** or **<Violin Sonata No. 7 in C minor>**"—I thought to myself, as I cocked my ears to listen to the exchange of the crisp and clear melody in F major.

However, something felt off when the piece reached the third movement, the Scherzo.

"..... Weird?"

"Hey, what are you doing, Nao? Don't reverse the tape!"

"Urm, sorry, I want to listen to it once more."

I reversed the tape back to the start of the third movement and played it again. That strange feeling I had was gradually taking shape.

It was the same in the last movement as well, but wasn't very noticeable because **<Spring>** was a slow-moving piece. I fast-forwarded the tape to the next piece.

Abrupt bursts of the chord in A Major. So the second piece is indeed <Kreutzer>. This should be enough to confirm my doubts. I sat in front of the sound box and focused my attention on the tarantella of the final movement.

"..... What's wrong, Nao?"

"Eh? Ah, nothing."

Was it just my imagination? I rewound the tape back to the middle portion of the tarantella.

"..... The way Mafuyu strikes the keys with her right hand..... Doesn't it feel like something's not quite right?"

Tetsurou tilted his head and gave it a thought. So it was just my imagination? But the strange feeling was way more intense than what I had felt during <Spring>.

"It's even more obvious towards the later movements. Like the way she forcefully presses the keys down after striking the keys."

What's this? It's just like..... Yes—

It was like she was using the force of her shoulders to put strength in her fingers to compensate for the lack of strength in her wrist. But the transfer of the force was delayed, resulting in a murkiness of the sound.

I shivered.

Tetsurou sat on the floor, shuffled his way next to me and pressed himself against the sound box. We rewound the tape and replayed it once more.

"You're right. Some of the notes sound sticky towards the end of the piece."

No, that's not it. That's not the main thing. There was something more important than that.

"Hey, you've got the better pair of ears, Nao. You sure about this? Is it really only her right hand?"

I nodded as Tetsurou shook me by my shoulders. It was just her right hand.

That glass-like right hand of Mafuyu's.

Why is this happening?

She played quite a few pieces for me today right before my eyes, but I didn't notice anything out of place back then.

No..... hold on a second. All the songs I heard today were compositions by Bach, aside from <Les Adieux sonata>, and were all pieces that were around three minutes in length. and she rested in-between the pieces as well.

But the pieces recorded in the tape are pieces by Beethoven, and the movements of <Kreutzer> were all very long. Moreover, Mafuyu wasn't playing solo; she was playing a duet with Yuri. So she didn't have the option of playing at her own pace.

So, that was what caused..... a relapse of her injury?

"I'm surprised you noticed something like that."

Tetsurou shook his head and stood up.

"I better give Ebichiri a call. Just in case."

"Eh? Ah, w-wait."

"What?"

I myself had no idea why I stopped Tetsurou.

"What if it's a relapse? Better safe than sorry."

A relapse. I gulped. No, but that condition was caused by psychological issues. There should be nothing restraining Mafuyu's fingers right now.

I suddenly recalled what Furukawa had said: she was putting way too much strain on her wrist. If she still used that strenuous method of playing the guitar, and coupled that with increasing amounts of piano practice, then it was possible that that was not a relapse—not a psychological issue. But something that was much more cruel.

In any case, I should ask Mafuyu first. It would be great if everything was fine.

But Tetsurou had already started calling while I was still entangled in my chaotic thoughts. The conversation ended quickly though.

"Ebichiri wasn't around, so I asked Matsumura to pass the message on."

Oh yeah, Ebichiri isn't home today. I heaved a sigh of relief. I guess it's better not to let Ebichiri know? I must've been mistaken. I rewound the tape once more. Would I realize it was all just an illusion of mine if I turn the volume down? I pressed the play button with that naive thought in mind.

But there was no way I could erase that strange feeling after noticing its presence.



"Well then, even though Comrade Ebisawa is not here yet, let's have a toast. Please raise your cup."

It was the day after, and that was what Kagurazaka-senpai, the first member to reach the practice room, had said to Chiaki and me when we made our way there. She passed both of us a paper cup and poured the contents of the bottle inside.

"Wait, this is liquor, isn't it?"

"You don't like whiskey? I have sake too."

"That's not the point. We have lessons later!"

"More!" said Chiaki. She downed it all in one gulp before I could even stop her.

"Fwuaaa! It's just barley tea!"

"We'd be punished and disbanded if they found out," smiled Senpai.

"But I want some real liquor! It won't do if I don't drink a cup or two!"

Chiaki slammed her paper cup on the desk. She had been in a bad mood since I had met her at the train station.

"..... Did something happen?"

"Of course!"

"What?"

"Uhhh—Senpai, are you hearing the dumb things Nao is saying?"

Senpai hugged the teary-eyed Chiaki and gently patted her head.

"It's no good drowning yourself in alcohol, Comrade Aihara. We made it past the auditions and won ourselves a brief happiness with our victory last night, so we should be hugging each other in joy right now."

"Mmm, I won't be attending lessons today. I want to be together with Senpai all day."

"I'm happy to hear that, but the diligent me will be attending lessons obediently as the exams are only two weeks away."

"Then I want to attend Senpai's lessons together with you....."

"You want to hide yourself in my skirt?"

"I'll do my best!"

Don't! What the heck are you girls doing?

"Are you interested in joining us, Comrade Ebisawa?"

Senpai directed her gaze past my shoulders; and I turned around in surprise.

There was a small slit at the door, and a pair of navy-blue eyes was peeking into the room. Senpai walked past me and Chiaki to the door, grabbed Mafuyu by the wrist, and pulled her in.

"Ah, do not....."

Mafuyu's tiny body was enveloped by Senpai's arms in a flash.

"Since all four of us are here now, let's have another toast."

Mafuyu broke herself free from Senpai's arms and retreated to the side of the wall and put her guitar down. The four of us exchanged glances for a brief moment, but immediately broke eye contact.

In the end, there was no change in our relationships.

I suddenly noticed Chiaki glaring at me fiercely. What, did I do something wrong?

Chiaki turned her head away unhappily and pulled the table to the middle of the room.

"Toasting with barley tea is of no importance! Let's begin discussing our battle plan!"

"Right, it's about time we think about the songs we want to play for

the actual performance."

Mafuyu nodded her head silently and sat on one of the stools.

"What should the theme of our next performance be? We should take this opportunity to coordinate our clothes as well."

"Since it's Christmas Eve, how about we all dress up in a Santa miniskirt?"

"No, that does not suit me."

"All the miniskirt Santas in the world would be out of job if Mafu-Mafu was incompatible with that costume."

"Young man, how about you wear a miniskirt as well? Or perhaps you should dress up as a reindeer? What a painful decision to make."

"Kyouko, that is not normal at all."

"I'll design the new set of clothes."

The girls began discussing the topic at hand while I just leaned against the wall and listened. Before I realized, I was already staring at Mafuyu's right hand. There were so many things that required my attention, but I couldn't even move an inch.



Mafuyu didn't come to practice after school because she had received a call right after the lessons were over. She dashed out of the classroom when her phone rang, but I knew that ringtone. It was Ebichiri.

"Sorry, I am not too sure what is going on, but Papa wants me to head home right now."

Said Mafuyu to Chiaki and me apologetically. I was shocked. Tetsurou should've informed Ebichiri about my baseless doubts through Miss Matsumura. Is that the reason for this? I mean, Ebichiri's a worrywart when it comes to things concerning Mafuyu. Actually, it might just be something related to the record company or the producers or something.

Doesn't this make me the same as Ebichiri? That kind of hurts.

"You're about to release your CD soon, right? Mafuyu will be getting busier and busier."

"M-Mmm..... The album is scheduled to release sometime early next year."

"Your concert too?"

"I guess that will be sometime later. But....."

Mafuyu gripped Chiaki's hands tightly.

"I will definitely continue practicing with the band. I will not cause any inconveniences for any one of you."

"Mmm, I understand."

Chiaki patted Mafuyu hard on the head.

"But don't force yourself. Mafu-Mafu always does things recklessly."

"Uh....."

Mafuyu's face went red. She walked out of the classroom after shooting a brief glance at me. "How's that!" Chiaki puffed her chest out as if to emphasize something.

"..... What?"

"What a mature adult I am. I'll put on a smile regardless of the pain I'm feeling; and I'll cheer my enemy on even if my heart is bleeding."

"Sorry, I don't quite understand what—"

Stars appeared before my eyes all of a sudden—Chiaki had sunk her knee deep into my stomach. She gave me no time to catch my breath, as the second and third strike followed right after.

"Wait! Don't..... stop! Chiaki, it hurts! What the hell are you doing!?"

"Nothing! Alright, let's head to the practice room! Nao, you idiot!"

After almost knocking me out, Chiaki dragged me down the corridor by my hands.

"It's almost Christmas, and there are still lots of things that need to be done!"

That's right. I need to settle everything before Christmas arrives.

The things related to Senpai; those related to Mafuyu; and those related to the band, of course.

I began running through the corridor following Chiaki's lead. Through the windows, I saw a small silhouette with maroon hair cutting across the square in front of the gates, making its way outside the school.

Back then, there was nothing more than just a fleeting unease in my heart. Little did I know that the audition would turn out to be the swan song of feketerigó.

Chapter 10 - Chilling Winds, The Cracked Room

Yuri called me on Mafuyu's second day of absence from school. It was lunch break then. When I saw the name of the caller on the phone, I jumped out of my seat, attracting stares from my classmates, then dashed out of the room and into the corridor.

"Naomi? Urm, right now—"

"Yuri? Is that you? Thank god, I finally got in touch with you. Urm, it's about Mafuyu. Do you know what happened to Mafuyu? She missed school, she doesn't pick up any of my calls, and when I went over to her house, I was turned away by Miss Matsumura—"

"Calm down, Naomi. There is something I have to tell you in regard to that. I had to go back to France to take care of some matters, so I could not receive your calls. Sorry about that. Also....."

Yuri's voice felt really heavy, causing the uneasiness inside me to grow larger and larger.

"Do you know where Mafuyu is? Where is she?"

"Well, I will fill you in on the details when we meet. Hey, calm down. There is nothing to worry about."

"Why are you....."

"Are you free this evening? Or tonight? I can wait until really late if necessary."

"Of course I am. Where are you right now? Can I go to you now?"

"Sorry, I am in Tokyo right now. Urm....."

Yuri told me about a practice room that the orchestra often used that was very well known in Japan. Tetsurou had brought me there once before, so I was sure I could find it with the help of my cellphone.

"I'll head there right now."

"Eh? But your classes....."

I disconnected the call.

I turned my head around. Chiaki was standing in front of me with her arm leaning against the door, her eyes filled with unease.

"Were you able to contact Mafuyu?"

I nodded my head hazily. Well, I didn't really contact Mafuyu herself. Damn it, why is everyone not being clear or straightforward about what's happening?

Mafuyu hadn't shown up at school since that day she had left early. However, in the meantime, she did send me two short messages:

"I am on leave because of work."

"Sorry, I am currently in Tokyo. I will explain when I return."

And that was all. She refused to take my calls; and when Chiaki and I paid a visit to the Ebisawa household, Matsumura put on her usual expressionless look and said, "Mistress is not around, as she has currently gone to Tokyo to meet Mr. Ebisawa. I do not know the reason for her visit," and prevented us from entering the house.

Is she going to disappear without saying anything again? I felt a shiver run down my spine. That won't happen—that was what I wanted to believe. That will never happen again. Is she together with Yuri right now? Did something happen?

"In any case, I'm heading over there to find out."

Chiaki's eyes widened.

"W-Where are you going? We still have classes in the afternoon!"

"I'll be leaving school early. Please inform our teachers and Senpai for me."

"—Nao!"

My wrists were restrained just as I was about to run out of the room. I was about to fling my arms down on reflex, but I froze in place when I saw Chiaki's teary eyes.

"..... Ah."

A murky voice escaped from Chiaki's trembling lips. The grip of her hands loosened, and slipped weakly off my wrists.

"..... I'm sorry, it must be because..... it's Mafuyu. Nao is giving

his all because it's about Mafuyu."

"Chiaki.....?"

"It's nothing." Chiaki kicked me in the butt. "Get going!"

But *you're* the one who grabbed *me*, no? But upon seeing Chiaki trying her hardest to hold back her tears, I swallowed those words back down my throat and turned away in silence.

I rushed onto the train in my uniform, then transferred onto the fast line that led to Zushi when the train reached the terminal. It'll take me about an hour to reach Shinagawa. I only noticed the passengers' gazes after I had grabbed onto the handles and stopped, panting because of all that running around. What's going on? I briefly looked around me and realized everyone was wearing warm winter attire. I had rushed out of the school without my coat on, and yet, I didn't notice the freezing temperature around me. I loosened my tie and slipped it into my chest pocket.

I took out my cellphone and opened up Mafuyu's messages, which I had already read a countless number of times. The messages didn't look out of the ordinary. What happened exactly? Did it really have to do with her right hand?

When I flipped my phone shut, I was gritting my teeth so hard I could feel a slight twinge of pain. So I listened to the sound of the train rumbling on the railway to calm myself down.

I almost missed the Shinagawa station because my eyes were closed and I was deep in thought; I had to slip my body past the closing doors to disembark the train. Calm down. It'd be incredibly silly of me if I were to get lost or encounter some sort of mishap right now.

I confirmed the location of the practice room using the navigation system on my cellphone, then walked past the ticketing gate. When the wind howled past my ears and neck, I finally regretted not bringing my coat along with me. I began running past the passersby, their faces hidden by the shadows.

The practice room was located in a residential area where there weren't many high-rise buildings around. It was a pretty modern-looking cubic structure, very easy to spot. Should I just go to the

information counter and mention Julien Flaubert? Or should I give Yuri a call? Would he even be able to receive my call in the music studio? Those questions immediately vanished the moment I walked into the lobby. The golden-haired silhouette, huddled up in the sofa next to the elevator, sprang up the instant it saw me.

"—Naomi!"

Yuri rushed towards me with his eyes all puffy. It was obvious he was crying not too long ago.

"Y-You really came right away. Sorry, urm, Maestro Ebisawa is not here yet."

"Ebichiri? You're meeting Ebichiri here? So Ebichiri's the one that wants to speak with me? Is Mafuyu together with him? Hey, what on earth....."

"Naomi, it hurts. Let go..... of me."

I snapped back to reality and saw my fingers digging hard into Yuri's frail shoulders.

"I-I'm sorry, but Mafuyu....."

"Let us go inside. It is not convenient here."

Yuri scanned the lobby with his teary eyes. The lady at the information counter was approaching us in shock, but Yuri waved his hand to show her he was alright. He then grabbed my hands and pulled me away. My brain had finally cooled down a little. What the hell was I doing back there?

We went up two stories and walked into what looked like a reception room. Inside, there was a glass table, two short sofas, a very plain bookshelf, and some other simple furniture. Photos of the past conductors were hanging neatly on the walls, and were staring down at us.

Yuri sighed, then walked behind the sofa to lean his hands against it to rest himself. He was wearing his male attire—a simple wool sweater and long pants—which really emphasized his slim figure.

"Sorry for frightening you....." I started off with an apology. Thinking back, my attitude did become kind of scary after I received Yuri's call. But Yuri just wiped the bottom of his eyes with the back

of his hand and forced a smile.

"I should be the one apologizing to Naomi instead."

"Why....."

Is it related to Mafuyu?

"Urm....." Yuri's gaze landed on my fingertips. "It is not very appropriate for me to explain, and Maestro Ebisawa should be here soon."

"Has the condition of Mafuyu's right hand..... deteriorated?"

I looked straight into Yuri's eyes, which were crystal clear because of his tears. But I knew my premonition was correct long before he nodded his head.

"Naomi is the only person who noticed. I-I am such a failure. I did not notice anything despite my multiple practices and rehearsals with her. It is all my fault."

Yuri's fingers, which were pressing against the back of the sofa, were trembling slightly.

"Why? It's not Yuri's fault—"

"They have been examining her for the past two days. I am not quite sure about the details, but her wrist..... The joint of her wrist is injured. Because she has been using the force of her wrist to make up for the lack of strength in her fingers."

I wasn't the least bit surprised, which was really intriguing to me.

Perhaps it was because I had already guessed that that was the case. I had already prepared myself mentally before he had even told me the news. When I ran from school to the train station, and while I was on the train..... No wait, maybe I noticed it when Mafuyu had stopped coming to school..... Or did I predict all this as soon as I noticed something was wrong in the sample tape?

Yuri's words reverberated in the canals of my ears.

Using the force of her wrist to make up for the lack of strength in her fingers.

He wasn't talking about the piano. There was no way she could play the piano with such a technique. But—

She could do that if we were talking about the guitar. That was possible.

"..... If this continues, there is a possibility that her right hand will never be able to move again."

Yuri covered his face with his hands and continued,

"It is all because I..... I did not teach her the right method of playing the guitar."

It felt like his voice was gradually sinking into a mire.

"Mafuyu might have been playing the guitar the way she was used to, even after her fingers had fully healed..... And since she had also begun practicing the piano again....."

An irritating metallic sound echoed behind me—the door had opened. But I forced myself not to turn around.

"—So you are already here."

After saying that, his footsteps began to close in on me. I turned my head around stiffly, and there stood Ebichiri, with a heavy coat on his body. He was looking at Yuri and me sternly. I wanted to greet him, but it felt like I was having difficulty controlling my head.

"You should have heard the news from Yuri."

I wanted to reply with a "Yes," but the voice that seeped out of my throat sounded more like the screech of a blackboard duster scraping across the strings of a violin.

"Why are both of you standing? Take a seat."

Yuri and I couldn't move despite his invitation. Ebichiri heaved a sigh.

"She went back for a second checkup this morning. I am forbidding her from touching a guitar ever again."

My feet moved reflexively as I walked towards Ebichiri. But when I saw him pursing his lips painfully as he shifted his gaze away, the words that were flowing up my throat turned into nothing more than a helpless sigh.

"I will send her to America as quickly as possible. We cannot have her losing the piano as well."

An uneasy feeling gushed up inside me, and I dug my fingers deep into my arm to hold myself back. What about the Christmas performance? Everyone's going up on stage, no? Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai have worked hard to ensure that this will be the best Christmas Eve ever—and Mafuyu as well—

I swallowed my words. It was pointless telling Ebichiri things like that.

"I understand your feelings."

Ebichiri's voice was dry as usual, but I could feel his warmth.

"The band has made it past the auditions, has it not? That girl has told me all about it. She must have been elated if she told me that without me asking."

I didn't want to hear that from him. It might've been selfish of me, but that sweet memory should've been kept to himself.

"However, I hope you understand."

"..... I..... do understand."

I spat those words out after much difficulty. It felt like I was a criminal having his sentence announced to him.

All the practices that would put strain on her hand would be stopped immediately, and she would be heading to America for treatment and rehabilitation. That's what's best for Mafuyu.

Even if it means she will never be able to play the guitar ever again.

"The doctors said her recovery should not take too long. Two months. She should be able to resume her studies if we time it to the winter holidays. However, for the guitar....."

Why must you say these things with an apologetic face? An indescribable anger was surging up within me. You should be talking to me in an unreasonable manner. Who can I direct my hatred towards if you're speaking with such reason?

I clenched my fist hard, to the point that my nails were almost cutting into the skin of my palms. I waited silently for my unreasonable anger to subside.

"I am really sorry for having you make this trip down. Mafuyu is

being stubborn, saying she does not want you to know about this. But how can that be possible? I wanted to tell you personally at the Hikawa residence, but I have a discussion with Mafuyu's record company after this."

"Where's..... Mafuyu? Where is she..... right now?"

"She is waiting in the car."

My heart ached as if nails were flowing into it.

Mafuyu is here. My desire to meet her and the thoughts of what I should say to her after we met were all mixed up in my veins. My vision darkened, and I almost knelt down.

"I am sorry, but I think it is best that you two do not meet today."

I nodded my head in agreement. Just then, a flurry of footsteps could be heard coming from the corridor. The door opened all of a sudden.

"Papa, I heard Naomi is here—"

Mafuyu froze right as her eyes came into contact with mine. The only thing that was moving, was Mafuyu's trembling lips. For some reason, her deep-blue dress looks very much like a mourning dress—a part of my brain was actually observing Mafuyu calmly in an unnatural way.

"W-Why?" Mafuyu's voice was like the final leaf left hanging on the tree branch in winter. "Why is Naomi here?"

"I asked him to come here."

Yuri, who had been silently sitting on the sofa the whole time, finally spoke.

"Flaubert told him everything."

Ebichiri added with a painful voice. Mafuyu's face turned white in a flash.

"Why!? I told you not to tell Naomi, didn't I? Yuri is an idiot! Dummy!"

Mafuyu bent her body and screamed as she gripped the handle of the opened door. Even though my eyes were fixed on Mafuyu, for some reason, I knew Yuri's face was contorting in sorrow behind

me.



"Mafuyu, there is no point in blaming Yuri."

Mafuyu swung her hair about as she rejected her father's words.

"I will be participating in the performance regardless of what Papa says! Everyone..... Everyone has been practicing hard, so how can I let it all go to waste!? I definitely will not!"

In my mind was the sound of Earth opening up. Ebichiri's face turned red with anger as he let out a roar, probably yelling something along the lines of "What are you talking about, you idiot?" But I could no longer process the sounds naturally. The only thing I could see was Mafuyu's lips, trembling because of the remnants of her pained voice, and her blue eyes, blurring because of her tears.

"Naomi! You must not tell anyone!" Her voice stabbed into my heart once more. "You must not tell Chiaki and Kyouko. Please. I will play the guitar properly, and I will definitely make it through the whole performance."

"What..... are you talking about?"

It felt as though I was tossed into a shattered world. I wasn't even sure if I was speaking right.

"It's your hand we're talking about, you know? You may never be able to play the guitar ever again, much less a live performance."

"I c-can still move it, it does not hurt at all. It is okay, it is just that my hand tires easily."

"Mafuyu!" I could finally hear Ebichiri's voice. "Did you not hear what the doctor said? It is even more dangerous because there are no obvious signs or symptoms! Stop being so willful!"

"I must get on the stage! I have decided already!"

With that said, Mafuyu retreated and slammed the door hard behind her. I could hear the sound of her receding footsteps on the other side of the wall.

"Do not follow us. You should head home for now."

Ebichiri yelled and stopped me just as I was about to run towards the door, then dashed out of the room himself. The footsteps were once again blocked off by the door.

My hand that was reaching out for the door, slumped down weakly to my side.

Is there nothing I can do? Even if I catch up to her, is there nothing I can say to Mafuyu?

A sob sounded behind me. I turned around and saw a tearful Yuri leaning against the back of the sofa. He stood up after much difficulty.

"..... It is all..... my fault."

His painful words flowed down with his tears.

No, it's not Yuri's fault, Yuri isn't in the wrong here. I couldn't offer him those disingenuous words of consolation—because the person that gave Mafuyu her guitar was none other than Yuri.

The only thing I could do was to walk to his side to support his body before it collapsed onto the floor.

"Sorry, Naomi. I am sorry....."

The young violinist buried his face in my chest and cried, while I buried my hand in his golden hair and hugged him tightly. If I hadn't done that, I probably would've fallen to my knees, covered up my ears, and buried myself in the darkness as well.

Chapter 11 - Backlighting, The Second Chime

Burying my body into the seat of the train, I traveled the entire Yamanote line, which I had taken by mistake, twice, before finally transferring onto the correct line to return home.

As I was walking out of the station, I grabbed my cellphone to check the time. Five in the afternoon — no wonder it's so dark already. I had a number of missed calls — six from Chiaki, and one from Senpai. The hazy and unreal stress that I had felt behind my ears the whole time, suddenly pressed itself into my shoulders.

Just as I was about to slip the phone back into my pocket, it rang.

"Geez! You finally picked up! Are you back? Did you see Mafuyu?"

"Eh? Ah, m-mmm."

Chiaki's ear-piercing voice made me feel at ease. I was no longer sure where my heart was.

"I saw her. Urm, I went to the orchestra's practice room. Yuri, Ebichiri and Mafuyu were all there."

"..... Did something happen? You—"

Chiaki's voice shriveled all of a sudden, and I recalled Mafuyu's painful cries. I can't tell Chiaki and Senpai.

I switched my cellphone to my left hand, gulped, then sat down on the stairs of the station, where there weren't too many people.

"Urm, it isn't anything huge. Well, you know, Mafuyu was chased around by reporters some time ago, right? It looks like the paparazzi are on her tail again."

I said it as slowly as I could to prevent my voice from splitting or rising in pitch.

"They chased her to her house, so she's currently hiding in a hotel in Tokyo. I think they wanted some help from Tetsurou, but they couldn't contact that idiot, so they asked Yuri to give me a call."

Incredible, I'm lying through my teeth without even trying. As I spoke to Chiaki, my voice and heartbeat began to steady themselves. I never knew I had a talent as useless as this. I'm the worst.

"I misunderstood things and went all the way to Shinagawa. What an idiot I am."

"Is that..... so? Thank goodness....."

When I heard Chiaki's warm and gentle voice, my chest hurt as though it were being pierced by a drill. She believed me, she actually believed me. But I guess that's reasonable, since I was the only person that had felt something was wrong with Mafuyu's right hand when listening to the violin concerto—I guess that was to be expected.

"Why didn't she give me a call? That's so mean! Senpai's worried too!"

"Y-Yeah." I tried to conjure up an excuse, but it was as if I was wringing the towel dry. "Because it seemed like the reporters were checking up on the band as well, and Mafuyu said she didn't want to trouble you. And if you knew where she was, you might've forced your way into her place to meet up with her."

"Nao's the only idiot that would do something like that!"

You're right. I'm the only idiot who would do that.

"And so? Will she be coming back tomorrow?"

"Eh? Ah, urm, I'm not too sure, but it probably won't be long."

What now? How long is Mafuyu planning to keep this a secret? It's quite impossible for her to do so forever. Why am I lying just like she asked me to?

"Let's work on our outfits then, alright? I've got a really interesting idea, so I'll bring the sample tomorrow."

"Mmm, I got it. Urm, can you explain everything to Kagurazaka-senpai for me?"

"Nao, you should tell her yourself—"

"Nah, she'd scold me silly if I was the one telling her."

Chiaki let out a giggle.

"Okay, I got it. I'll pass the message on for you. Will you be coming back to school later?"

"Ah....." Right, I left my coat and bag at school. "Mmm, I'll be there later."

I hung up and slid my phone into my pocket. It felt like my hands had come into contact with some sort of stinking oil or something.

The reason I had asked Chiaki to pass the message on for me was because, if I had told Senpai myself, she would've definitely seen through my lies in an instant. But I still had to make the trip back to school. I felt really horrible, and couldn't even stand up — but if I head straight home, Chiaki will definitely deliver my stuff to me, and that would make things awkward.

I sat myself down at the corner of the stairs and buried my head between my legs for a good ten minutes, until the cold seeped through my body. It was difficult to stand back up, even with the help of the railing.



The next day, Mafuyu didn't show up for morning practice again.

"Mafuyu's not coming today either? But I made a new T-shirt already."

Said Chiaki unenthusiastically, as she adjusted the pedal of the bass drum while we were tuning.

"Hmm, I'm not too sure either."

I had called her a few times yesterday night, but she never picked up.

After tuning her instrument carefully, Kagurazaka-senpai spoke.

"Young man, you have something to say to me, right? If you want, we can go somewhere where we'll be alone."

A shiver ran down my spine. Senpai said that in a half-joking manner, but there was no hint of mischief in her eyes.

Does Senpai know something? I mean, it's her we're talking about.

It's possible that, during these last two days I was moping, she found out about Mafuyu's whereabouts and what happened to her right hand.

No, there's no way she would remain silent if she knew.

Because—

feketerigó can never fly again.

"Regardless of what I have to say, Senpai always ignores me anyway, right? So I've given up already."

I continued my lie and even put on a smile. Why am I doing this? I wasn't too sure myself. But there was no way I could look into Senpai's eyes — eyes that could see through everything — so I heaved a sigh of relief when she turned her attention to Chiaki.

"It's unlikely we'll agree with your design, but let's see the clothes you've come up with this time anyway, Comrade Aihara."

"That's just mean, Senpai! I'm planning to give Mafuyu a huge surprise, so I'll keep it secret a little while longer."

I listened to their reassuring conversation from afar, and pretended to spend the bulk of my time tuning my bass. The bell rang not long after.

Mafuyu wasn't in the classroom either, and didn't show up even after homeroom was over, or after our lessons had started. It was already the fourth day, and I was being bombarded with questions like "Our Princess isn't at school today either, does Nao know why?" from my classmates, including Terada.

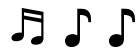
What's going on? Is she still undergoing checkups? Or did Ebichiri lock her up in the house? That's highly possible, judging from what she said yesterday before we parted. She said she would definitely participate in the Christmas performance. What the heck was she thinking? It's possible she won't even be able to move her right hand.

She wouldn't fly to America without informing us, would she? No, Ebichiri should be busy preparing for his performance of Beethoven's Ninth.

But it should be okay for her to attend school, right? I wanted to see Mafuyu so badly.

I wanted to see her.

I spent the rest of the morning lessons gripping my desk hard, enduring the uneasy thoughts that were swirling inside me.



I had no appetite during lunch break, so I passed my lunch box to Chiaki and headed to the office to grab the keys to the practice room.

"Oh, Nao. Good timing."

I was caught by someone at the entrance of the office. It was Miss Maki, the music teacher and the advisor of the Folk Music Research Club. She looked visibly tired. It was quite a waste of her young and beautiful face, which was perfectly suited for tricking the male students of our school.

"Mafuyu's here in the music preparatory room."

She whispered. I jumped in surprise and looked at Miss Maki's face.

"I heard the details from Maestro Ebisawa. In any case, you should head over there for now. I have to make a trip to the administration office."

I nodded my head stiffly.

"You didn't tell Kagurazaka or Aihara about Mafuyu's hand, right?" asked Miss Maki in a hushed tone.

"..... Yeah, Mafuyu told me not to tell them."

"Even so, it's impossible to keep it a secret forever."

Miss Maki was right. But the only thing I could do was keep my lips shut.

"Think about what you can do."

She gave me a slap on the back as I dashed in the direction of the stairs.

On the fourth floor of the school building, there was a sliding door located to the right of the metal door of the music room. That was the entrance to the music preparatory room — a place no student

would enter under normal circumstances. Miss Maki's territory, to be exact.

When I opened the door, my eyes were greeted by the rays of the sun of the winter noon. The curtains in the room were open, and the maroon-coloured hair was waiting on the other side of the piano, which took up half the space of the cramped room.

Mafuyu stood up in front of the backlighting and opened her eyes wide as she moved her chair backwards. Her hair was fluttering, and the scores in her hand dropped to the floor.

I was expecting her to hit me with harsh words, but all she did was to lower her eyes and sit back down on the chair.

I stepped into the room and closed the door, then leaned against the wall on the left to avoid the sunlight coming from the window.

Both of us remained silent for quite a while. I could almost hear the sun inching across the sky.

"..... Sorry."

Mafuyu finally spoke.

"For what happened yesterday."

I shook my head. She apologized first. And that filled me with guilt.

"Yuri..... he is not..... angry, right?"

"He wasn't, but he cried."

Back then, Yuri had refused my offer to see him home and had dashed out of the reception room. After he left, I collapsed onto the sofa helplessly, and was unable to move for a while.

"Yuri..... he is not in the wrong."

Mafuyu shifted her gaze to her opened right hand and murmured.

"This is not Yuri's fault. I will come up with something."

"You'll come up with something?"

"I just have to endure until the Christmas performance is over."

"You're still saying stupid things like that?" I moved towards the piano unconsciously. "Now's not the time to be thinking about the concert, is it? You might never be able to play the piano ever again!"

"Why does the piano matter....."

Mafuyu said that unconsciously and reflexively gripped her arm with her right hand. She then swallowed her words.

"I-I do know it is really silly of me to be thinking this way, but....."

"If that's the case, then....."

"But I want to take part in the concert! I do not want to be unable to play the guitar!"

"That's why I'm telling you not to push yourself. What if you really break that hand of yours?"

"It does not matter even if I break it!"

My heart was pierced by Mafuyu's words.

With her right hand pressing the area above her heart, and her eyes filled with tears, Mafuyu continued.

"Because, I am doing it all for Naomi....."

"For me.....?"

"That applies to the piano, and the guitar as well. I am playing them for Naomi's sake. My hand is as good as broken if I cannot perform on the same stage as you. I cannot accept that Chiaki and Kyouko can perform together with you, but not me."

I stumbled against the icy cold wall.

"Why..... are you willing to go to such lengths?"

What the hell am I asking? Am I an idiot? It felt as though there were a calm persona in my head kicking me hard in the skull. Mafuyu's face looked as though it was melting.

"Why? You are asking me why? Do you not have the slightest idea at all?"

That was enough to shatter me, who was already filled with cracks all over.

"Wait, Mafuyu. I'm sorry—"

"Do not say any more!"

Mafuyu covered her ears and screamed.

"I do not need your concern! I do not want to hear that from you!"

"Then what should I do?"

"I do not know! I do not know!"

Mafuyu hugged her head and slumped down onto the piano chair. Her shoulders were trembling violently.

The world felt light all of a sudden. The walls, the bookshelves, the piano and the chair were all flying around me. What's happening? I looked around in bewilderment and realized that I had collapsed onto the floor. I leaned against the wall and straightened out my legs.

It felt like every ounce of my strength had been sapped away by the icy floor.

Why have things turned out this way?

Is it because I can't express myself properly? Does Mafuyu know about Kagurazaka-senpai's confession, as well as my inability to decisively reject her? And about how I've been pushing the conclusion of that issue further and further back all the time?

Even if she didn't know about all that, Mafuyu still celebrated her birthday with me despite the uneasiness inside her that arose because of my excuses for not moving forward.

She was trying her hardest to stand on the same stage as me on Christmas.

I'm the worst.

There's nothing I can say now that would help Mafuyu's right hand. Our Christmas is totally wrecked already. There's no salvaging it.

Still, I straightened my knees out and stood up, using the edge of the piano cover to support myself.

"Mafuyu."

Her frail shoulders flinched.

"Mafuyu's....."

The words following that were stuck on the edge of my mouth, unsure about where they should've been going. Then, they arrived at a frozen place.

"Mafuyu's body is way more important. The Christmas concert will be there every year, but Mafuyu's right hand is irreplaceable. You

have to get it treated."

What the hell was that? I wasn't planning to lecture her. There should've been something else that I wanted to say. Mafuyu swayed her maroon hair.

"I know that. Please do not say the same things Papa did."

I couldn't even touch her shoulders despite being so close to her. I was frozen in place.

"I know that. Of course I do. But Naomi might not be around the next Christmas."

"How can that be....."

I swallowed my words.

I'm the cause of the unreasonable unease inside her, isn't that right?

I was at a loss for words. And Mafuyu just hugged her shoulders and curled herself up.



A long period of silence lingered between us for god knows how long. When Mafuyu finally stood up, the sun was still lurking somewhere around the roof of the sports complex. It hadn't move an inch.

"Where..... are you going?"

I was forced to ask that question when I saw Mafuyu squeezing past the narrow gap between the piano and the wall, making her way towards the door.

"To the practice room."

A cold answer.

"But..... you can't play the guitar, right?"

With her hand pressed against the door, Mafuyu nodded with her back still facing me.

"Papa has confiscated my Stratocaster."

"Then what are you planning to do? How long are you planning to

keep it hidden from Senpai and Chiaki—"

"I know that!"

Mafuyu walked out of the room. And I chased after her footsteps in a hurry.

Kagurazaka-senpai was already in the practice room by the time we arrived; and when we walked inside, she tossed the scores in her hand onto the synthesizer, stood up, and gave Mafuyu a sudden and tight hug.

"Mmmmmmm.....—"

Mafuyu swung her arms about painfully as her face was forcefully buried in Senpai's coat.

"Whoa..... S-Senpai!"

I tried to break them up, but Senpai hugged Mafuyu and dodged my attempt.

"You can't have Comrade Ebisawa all to yourself, young man."

"What do you mean by that!?"

"It..... hurts. Please let me go, Kyouko."

"I won't be able to fill the loneliness I've suffered in the past three days if I don't do this."

Mafuyu, who was planning to shove Kyouko away, dropped her arms weakly to her side.

"There's no need for words right now. I just need a confirmation."

Senpai whispered into Mafuyu's ears. Ahh, she knew something was going on—that was what I had noticed earlier. I retreated to a corner, sat down on the floor, and watched on like an idiot as the two girls continued to hug each other.

"..... I am sorry."

Mafuyu murmured, with the tip of her nose buried in Senpai's bosom. Senpai stroked Mafuyu's hair quietly before she finally let Mafuyu go and allowed her to take a seat.

"You didn't bring your guitar with you, did you?"

Senpai's question caused Mafuyu's shoulders to flinch. It was her

silent confirmation.

"I see."

It seemed like Senpai was at a loss for words as well — which was surprising, given that she was an expert with words.

A creaking sound suddenly echoed, and cold air flowed into the room. The three of us looked in the direction of the door at the same time.

"Mafuyu! You should've come to the classroom if you were at school! I was so worried about you!"

Chiaki pounced at Mafuyu and hooked her arms around Mafuyu's neck.

"M-Mmm....."

A disturbed expression appeared on Mafuyu's face. She pressed her cheek against Chiaki's arm, and it was then that Chiaki noticed the heavy atmosphere in the room. She glanced at Senpai first, then shifted her gaze to me, as if she had just noticed my presence in the room.

"..... Did something happen?"

Finally, Chiaki looked at Mafuyu. Mafuyu shook her head.

"Nothing happened. Everyone's just waiting for Comrade Aihara to heat things up!"

Lied Senpai, with a stiff smile on her face. There was no way Chiaki couldn't tell something was amiss, but she tilted her head and said, "Well then"—then pulled a paper bag out from under the table. She's probably planning to do just what Senpai said.

"This..... is feketerigó's new T-shirt! Though there's only one for now, since it takes quite a bit of effort to make."

Chiaki pulled a bright yellowish-green, long-sleeved T-shirt out of the paper bag and displayed it for all of us to see. The rings around the neck and sleeves were red.

"Mmm, rejected. I guess we can sell it as fan merchandise though." Senpai's reply was instantaneous.

"That's mean! It took me a great deal of effort to make this! See,

this is the badge for <Lonely Hearts Club Band>, and I've included the armband too."

Mafuyu and I were shocked by that incredibly flashy shirt.

It's true. The badge was printed right there on the chest, and the V-shaped red-and-yellow armband was printed on the sleeve.

"This is scanned from the cover of <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>, which Nao had given me. Same size as that on the record. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"..... Naomi..... gave it to you?" Mafuyu's voice was trembling. "..... The Beatles?"

Chiaki's expressions darkened as she nodded her head. I heard something crack inside Mafuyu. When she turned around, her gaze was devoid of any warmth.

"..... Why? You gave it to Chiaki too?"

My mind went blank. When I nodded my head, I could feel my dry throat spasm in pain. I didn't try to stop Mafuyu as she prepared to leave after kicking her chair.

"W-Wait, Mafuyu? W-What's wrong?"

Chiaki ran over to Mafuyu and grabbed her shoulder, but Mafuyu turned around and swatted her hand away. Chiaki leaned her back against the wall, her face so ghastly white it looked almost transparent.

"D-Do you hate this shirt that much? U-Urm, you don't have to wear it on stage if you don't want to."

Mafuyu shut her eyes tight and shook her maroon hair with all her might.

"I will not be going on stage ever again anyway."

"..... Huh?"

"I can no longer play the guitar. For the past two days, I have been undergoing checkups in the hospital. The doctor said my wrist would not be able to withstand the stress if I continued playing the guitar the way I do. And so!"

Stop. I wanted to yell. But the air in my throat had leaked away,

and I couldn't make a sound. I couldn't even stand up. There..... There should be a better way to resolve the situation..... But Mafuyu had been pushed into a corner because of me. It was my fault.

"Mafuyu!"

Mafuyu dashed out of the room just as Chiaki was about to get close to her. She had likely kicked the door open as she was leaving, as the building was trembling slightly. The cold air entered the practice room once more, and blew away the remaining warmth that was enveloping my body.

I stood up. I have to chase after Mafuyu. But Chiaki grabbed me by the collar.

"W-What? What was that just now? Hey, what did Mafuyu mean when she said 'You gave it to Chiaki too'?"

My guilt and the dizziness that resulted from standing up too suddenly became mixed in a blackish-red patch in my mind. I wanted to puke, but I endured the nausea by pinching the side of my body and replied,

"..... It was Mafuyu's..... birthday present..... that I had given her. The vinyl record of <Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band>."

The same present I gave Chiaki. I'm an idiot. A hopeless one. *Pa!* A strong force suddenly caused my neck to twist, and a stinging pain spread throughout my cheek. Chiaki had slapped me.

"You idiot! D-Don't chase after us! I'll go instead!"

Chiaki dashed out of the room, and the door of the practice room closed once more. The wind pressure of the closing door caused me to fall backwards, but something soft behind me supported me and prevented me from falling to the floor.

I looked up and saw Kagurazaka-senpai's emotionless face.

She was supporting me with her arms positioned beneath my armpits.

"..... S-Sorry."

I wanted to stand up and move away from Senpai, but she refused to let me go. She clasped her hands around my chest.

My body heat was leaving me.

As if all the blood inside me was flowing out of my ears.

♪ ♪

Chiaki and Mafuyu never returned, even after the preparatory bell — which signaled the end of our lunch break — had rung. After Mafuyu and Chiaki had left, I just sat silently on a chair, hugging Chiaki's feketerigó shirt in my chest. As for Kagurazaka-senpai, she was facing the desk with her guitar resting on her thighs, scribbling nonstop on the staff papers. Listening to the occasional phrases she strummed, I could tell she was rearranging the piece for a single guitar.

At the same time the preparatory bell chimed, Senpai closed her notebook shut and put her guitar back into its case.

"—Young man."

The silence was finally broken.

"..... Yes?"

"You know, I did something really despicable. Do you know why I chose to confess to you at the time I did?"

Why?

Was there a reason to it?

"It was a curse."

I was stunned. My eyes were staring blankly at Senpai.

"Confessing to you meant I would destroy the balance in our relationship. And by refusing to hear your answer, young man, I was preventing you from doing to Mafuyu what I did to you. A curse."

"Wha—"

"Because I wanted to have you so badly. Even if there was a ninety-nine percent chance of me failing..... Even if I had to run away, or was forced to inch forward by crawling..... I still wished to stake everything on that sliver of a possibility. I'm not ashamed of the despicable things I did, but....."

Senpai snapped the spring buckle of her guitar case and leaned the case against the wall.

"As someone who failed to see an ending like this, I find myself to be the worst. I'm disgusted with myself."

What's she talking about?

Senpai's not the one in the wrong here. Everything is my fault.

Just as I was about to sink deep into a dark mire, without much consideration for my feelings, Senpai forcibly pulled me up.

"Young man, I will never smile in front of you ever again."

"..... Eh.....?"

"I've lost interest in this battle with no enemies. It's not even worth using all my despicable tricks. My love for you shall be frozen as of now."

Senpai stepped out of the room without even turning her head around to look at me.

"The next time I show you my smile, will be the day Comrade Ebisawa returns."

The door suddenly shut. I slid down the wall and curled myself up on the floor.

Alone by myself in that room filled with dust, I heard the second bell chime.

Chapter 12 - Treasure, Butterfly, Heat of Machine

That night, when I was sitting by myself on my bed in the dark, hugging my knees, I heard a tapping sound on the other side of my drawn curtains.

Someone was knocking on my window.

"..... Chiaki?"

I curled myself up. For a brief moment, I thought it was Mafuyu. But I could tell it was Chiaki from how the knocks sounded; or perhaps I came to that conclusion because I didn't want to be disappointed by my expectations.

The strong, rapid knocks forced me to respond.

"Come in, the window's not latched."

I was too lazy to leave my bed. First came the sound of the window opening—then, of the curtains being drawn.

Chiaki was standing right there, with the aluminum window frame and the night sky as her backdrop. She had climbed to the second floor window via the tree in the garden. Her slightly orange hair was untied and was fluttering and slapping against her cheeks in the cold wind of the winter night. Despite the temperature though, she was still wearing her school uniform.

She pressed her right hand against the window frame but didn't step in. With my eyes already accustomed to the darkness, I could see that Chiaki was staring at me fiercely while holding something in her left hand.

I gulped my saliva down my parched throat and got out of bed. It was then that I realized that I was still wearing my uniform as well.

"..... What..... happened to Mafuyu? Did you find her?"

They hadn't even returned for the afternoon lessons.

Basking in the light of the night, Chiaki muttered, with a voice that

could've been blown away by the wind,

"All Nao thinks of is Mafuyu."

I took a deep breath.

"..... Urm, sorry, it's nothing..... I didn't catch up to Mafuyu. I lost her. I also went to her house to check if she was there, but they said she wasn't around and chased me away. I skipped the rest of school because it was way too troublesome to go back."

"Chiaki, urm....."

"So what about the live performance?"

"What are you still standing there for? That's really dangerous, you know?"—I thought to myself.

"..... Well, Senpai probably....."

"I'm not asking Nao about what's on Senpai's mind!" Chiaki suddenly roared. "I'm asking you about what's on *your* mind!"

W-Who, me?

I didn't have anything left in me to think about the band or the performance anymore. It was even taking me a great deal of effort just to stand up using the leg of the bed.

"|—"

My voice brushed past Chiaki's ears and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the window.

There was nothing to catch it.

"..... Whatever, I get it."

Chiaki smiled for the first time, then slightly shifted the angle of her face. The streetlights outside were shining on Chiaki's cheeks, and I noticed there were visible traces of moisture on her face. Upon noticing that something off with my expression, Chiaki quickly brushed her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Here, I'm returning this to you."

Chiaki stretched her left hand through the window. In her hand, was a flat and large squarish—

It was a red record jacket. <Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club

Band>.

There was no way I could stretch my hand out to take it. All I had to do was move forward about two meters and reach out for it, but I couldn't even leave the side of my bed.

"Take it quickly! Stupid Nao!"

She tossed the record jacket at me. It hit my knee and dropped to the floor like a dead moth.

I picked it up slowly, and realized it was strangely light.

"..... Just the jacket? What about the disk?"

Actually, it doesn't really matter. It's okay for her to not return it to me.....

"Just the jacket. Because I think of Mafuyu's tearful expression whenever I see it, and that pisses me off. I'm keeping the record though."

"W-Why.....?"

"What do you mean 'why!'?" screamed Chiaki, as she gripped the window frame. "How can I possibly return the content to you? That's my treasure, you know!? You should at least understand that much, you idiot!"

Chiaki slammed the window shut forcefully, as if she were trying to break it.

"I've had enough for today! You should just die, Nao!"

Came Chiaki's voice through the glass, before she disappeared from my sight in a flash. The sound of her footsteps echoed on the rooftop, and were followed by the sound of rustling branches and twigs brushing against the wall of the building.

But all these sounds were swallowed up by the night in an instant.

Hugging the empty record jacket, I sat on my bed once more. Her treasure.



My phone rang in the middle of the night. The ring tone, <Blackbird>, caused me to fall out my bed and onto the floor.

I checked and rechecked the vibrating screen multiple times. It was Mafuyu. It really was Mafuyu.

"Mafuyu? Is this Mafuyu?"

I asked that stupid question the moment I picked up the call; and for a while, no sounds came from the receiver. My chest stirred with unease.

"..... Sorry for calling despite the late hour."

It was Mafuyu's voice. But she was speaking as though she was talking to a stranger, and that made me depressed.

"U-U-Urm, with regard to the record incident today, well....."

What now? How should I apologize to her? Should I even be apologizing? What for? My thoughts came to a stalemate as they rumbled around in my eyeballs. I felt like puking.

"It does not matter anymore."

"—It does! Well, I—"

"It does not. I had a proper talk with Papa today, and have decided to go back to America. There are really good doctors there."

The bubbling breaths were stirring up my chest.

"Since I will be staying there for a year, I will not be going to school anymore."

I shut my eyes tight and tried to detect any hint of emotion in Mafuyu's voice—but found nothing. A year? She won't be coming to school for a whole year? Bit by bit, like a transparent liquid spreading outwards, the meaning of her words finally sunk into my consciousness.

"..... But..... your father said it should take only two months or so....."

"I have already made up my mind. I asked Papa to change the plan."

Mafuyu's voice, soft but unshaken, severed my trembling voice.

"Papa is already making preparations. He will be bringing me there as soon as possible, even if it is very demanding of me. We will be heading off early next year at the soonest. Perhaps we might even

make it by the end of this year."

When did we first meet? I tried to remember with my blanked-out mind. It was early April, during spring. It hasn't even been a year. But it felt like we had been together for a long, long time.

"Therefore—"

Therefore? Therefore, what?

But both Mafuyu and I said nothing after that.

I wasn't even sure when the call was disconnected.

I threw my phone onto the bed, then covered my trembling body with a blanket and curled myself up on my mattress once more. I had no idea what time it was, but I wasn't the least bit sleepy. I tried to refrain from thinking any deeper, but my consciousness was having thoughts on its own. Plenty of failures, lots of meaningless propositions—if only I had said that; what if I hadn't mentioned this..... Things like that. All these things were draining heat away from my body bit by bit.

I finally realized that the reason I couldn't sleep wasn't because I wasn't shutting my eyes, but because something was going on in my mind—although my eyeballs did roll around whenever I closed my eyes, resulting in pain.

I kicked the blanket away and sat up. The chilling temperature turned into thousands of needles and pricked my body.

Light from the living room below was filtering in through the slit of my door, and I could hear the faint sound of music.

"..... Oh, you're still up? It's already two. Go to bed after you're done peeing."

Said Tetsurou, without turning his head. He continued to tap on his laptop while lying on the sofa. As for me, my dull mind was trying to figure out what that familiar melody swirling around my ears was.

The cassette player, located in the middle of the sound system, was whirling. It was a violin concerto. The one Mafuyu had given me.

"Ahh, sorry. I played it without asking. It seems like things are getting serious."

Tetsurou's nonchalant statement was a sort of consolation for my

battered heart.

I knelt in front of the boombox. Thank god it's <Spring>. I would have frozen in place if <Kreutzer> had been playing. Yuri's warm timbre was fluttering above Mafuyu's slow footsteps like a swarm of butterflies.

I pressed the stop button to retrieve the tape from the player.

The plastic object was lying flat on my palm.

With both my hands grabbing onto the cassette tape, I began putting force into my thumbs. It was almost an unconscious effort. It's all this tape's fault. If only I hadn't listened to it. If only I hadn't noticed.

If I hadn't noticed..... would things still have turned out like this? Actually, the situation might've turned out much worse than it is right now.

But that was of no importance to me. I no longer wished to hear Mafuyu's piano.

It would be great if everything was broken.

The transparent plastic surface was turning murky white. *Kra, kra*. It was an unpleasant sensation.

However, my fingers were drained of their strength in an instant.

Pa. The sound came from the tape. A tear had fallen onto the surface. It was a tear that had finally forced its way out of my eyes. There was still a faint trace of heat left in the tape. Even if it was heat caused by the spinning of the machine, the fact that it was heat was undeniable.

The present Mafuyu had given me.

There was no way I could desert it, much less destroy it. Because it is my treasure. No matter what happens, and no matter where Mafuyu goes, the fact that I love Mafuyu will never change. And it was for that reason that I also couldn't abandon those feelings of mine.

"Ah..... A-Ah....."

A choking voice flowed out from my throat.

I hugged the tape tightly in my chest, as though I were trying to force it through my ribs.

Treasure. The word Chiaki had used earlier. The record I had given her. And the streak of tears I had seen because of the streetlights.

How can it be? But.....

I..... see. Why.....

I curled myself up in front of the boombox that was giving off some background noise. The skin on my neck felt like it was about to tear apart. I actually realized something at the worst possible moment. No way, it has to be my imagination. I must've gotten it wrong somewhere. I was trying my hardest to convince myself deep in my mind, that it wasn't true; but at a depth way deeper than that, was the confirmation that came from my soul.

With the tape still nestled in my hand, I dashed out of the living room and climbed up the stairs to pick up my cellphone in my room. As I was searching for Chiaki's number, my fingers stopped. What's the point of calling her now? Is there even anything I can say to her?

What I did to Chiaki was just as bad as what I did to Mafuyu..... No, it was way worse.

I dropped myself onto my bed. My body was an ironic existence as well—it actually felt like passing out at a time like this. And so, with the cassette tape and the cellphone in my hands, I was forcefully dragged off to sleep.

Chapter 13 - Morning, News Report, Dog Whistle

"Nao, hey Nao! I'm going out soon, so fix me my breakfast!"

The rattling of my shoulders forced me to slowly open my eyes. It was as if my body was stuck to the bed sheets—I could feel my skin tearing apart when I twisted my neck.

I fixed my sight on the ceiling for a while, to allow my eyes to become accustomed to the bright surroundings, then shot a glance at Tetsurou's face.

"..... This is the worst morning of my life....."

So what awaits me after the worst night of my life, is Tetsurou waking me up in the morning?

"Hurry up and fix me my breakfast! I have something to discuss with Company M today, but they're not willing to fork out any lunch money."

Enough. Quit shaking me, my head hurts. I swatted Tetsurou's hands away and sat up with a frown. It's a little too bright in here. What time is it already?

"Oh right, I called school and asked for a leave on your behalf, since you still weren't up at eight. Ain't I a nice daddy?"

"It's already ten, damn it! If you were making the call anyway, why didn't you just wake me up at eight instead!?"

A brief glance at the clock was enough to fully wake me up. I leapt off my bed and questioned Tetsurou.

"So you're pushing the blame onto someone else and ignoring the fact that you were lazing around in bed. Kids nowadays."

"U-Ugh....."

Nothing pissed me off more than being retorted by a sound argument from Tetsurou. Whatever, I'm too ashamed to see Chiaki or Kagurazaka-senpai anyway, so I might as well just rest. I pulled

my blanket up over my head.

"My breakfast!" said Tetsurou, in an embarrassing voice.

"There's **Weider in Jelly** in the fridge."

"Can you heat that up and use it as gravy on rice?"

Do as you please.

I didn't offer a retort because I thought he was just kidding, but when he actually walked out of the room without saying anything, I caught up to him and made my way to the kitchen.

I waited for Tetsurou to finish a simple meal of Chinese-don before sending him off to work.

"Have you listened to Mafuyu's tape in its entirety? From beginning to end?"

Asked Tetsurou, with his head turned around as he was putting his shoes on at the door.

"..... Eh?"

Of course I have. All the way to the tarantella of <Kreutzer Sonata>. That was how I had noticed the invisible injury to Mafuyu's right hand. Why's he bringing this up all of a sudden?

"In any case, it'd be best if you listened to it all the way to the end."

And with that said, Tetsurou left. The sound of the exhaust was getting further and further away.

What does he mean by that? I don't understand him. And it's not like I want to listen to that tape again—it was just way too painful.

I shook my head to stop those thoughts of mine. My vision was still blurry, so I decided to take a shower. The shirt on my body was all wrinkled since I had worn my uniform to sleep.

After I finished showering, I returned to the living room while I was drying my hair with a towel. Despite the fantastic weather outside, I felt cold—even after putting on a wool cardigan over my thick sweatshirt. When did I start not giving a damn about skipping classes? When did it all begin?

Was it when my life began to revolve around the band?

I fished out the tape that had dropped beneath my bed, and carefully brought it back to the living room on the first floor as if I was holding an egg.

After pressing the play button, I turned the volume down and curled myself up on the sofa.

What came flowing to me out of the speakers was the beautiful melody of the violin sonata <Spring>. Beethoven was an inconceivable composer. It was a scenic view, but he didn't express it simply with just a beautiful phrase; he arranged it so that specific places in the piece would stab you deep in your heart, inflicting more and more sorrow as the piece progressed.

I shouldn't be listening to this. I didn't want to imagine Mafuyu hammering the keys with her delicate, blood-stained fingers. But I remained motionlessly curled up on the sofa, listening to <Kreutzer Sonata> even after it had already started. It felt like Yuri's violin was severing my head from my neck, while Mafuyu's piano was inflicting wounds to each and every bone in my body—but the pain was actually pretty comfortable to me.

Mafuyu is about to leave my side.

But even so, it's still possible I'll be able to hear her piano in the future. Having abandoned the guitar, Mafuyu will definitely return back to that world after she's done with her rehabilitation in America.

Is this okay?

Am I okay with this?

The strength in my arms, which were rubbing my knees, increased. I huddled my body to dodge the intense dance and the violent clashes between Mafuyu and Yuri—to escape the sparks, heat, and pain released by the tarantella of the final movement.

<Kreutzer> was finally over. The remaining reverberations were sucked dry by the silence of the winter noon, and all that was left was the sound of the tape rotating.

Feketerigó was already broken.

If this is what Mafuyu wants, then nothing I think or do matters anymore.

If Mafuyu were seeking help, I would definitely be there to bring her back somehow. But this time, it's different. Mafuyu's heading across the ocean of her own accord; and the ones being left behind are the three of us—

Pa. I lifted my head. It came from the sound system. The cassette player had already spun to the end of the A-side, so it was changing sides automatically.

There was a brief interval of suffocating white noise.

And then, flowing from the bottom, came the pure and clean sounds of the Stratocaster. Each and every note was as clear as a silver strand of rain, and they all merged into a seamless harmony that flowed into my ears. It was a brilliant arpeggio.

It wasn't any song in particular—just a phrase that Mafuyu always strummed as warm-up every time she played the guitar. The upward-spiraling air bubbles of the semitone; and the flock of birds weaving between the clouds and the ground. Sounds, sounds, and more sounds, arranged together in perfect geometry and a perfect distance away from each other, were all injected into my veins.

So there were such recordings on the B-side, huh. I totally didn't realize. Is this what Tetsurou was referring to?

I imagined the dirty walls, the amplifiers, the synthesizers and the chairs, all arranged on the floor of our practice room. There was Mafuyu, strumming her guitar with her head lowered. And Chiaki, all warmed up, smashing the hi-hat as she barged into the rhythm. Kagurazaka-senpai would then flick on the switch of the microphone with a smile, causing a minute noise to streak through the air. That was how we would usually start.

A scene that would no longer return.

I shut my eyes to savour the sweet hallucination.

But the tape came to a sudden halt, and I was thrown back into the empty living room once more. What had been left behind in that rocking practice room though, was my heart.

If I could just hug my knees, plug my ears and wait for numerous nights and mornings to pass by, things would be settled with me cleanly forgetting about everything. Left alone, a broken object

would just break down even further. That was the natural progression of things, and was also the easier path for me to take. I understood that much at least.

So I stood up from the sofa.

I returned to my room and promptly began packing my toolbox. When I was done, I went downstairs to search through the storage cabinet, where there was a plastic drawer filled with all the junk I had collected up until then. I did organize that stuff at a minimal level, but it still took me quite a bit of time to find everything I needed.



When night arrived, I made my way over to Chiaki's house, which was only five minutes away.

I had thought about calling her prior to my visit, but I had no idea what to say to her. And it would've been troublesome if she had forbidden me from going, so I was left with no other option but to pay her a sudden visit at night.

"Oh my, it's Nao. Chiaki? She's here. Come on in. Have you had dinner already? Chiaki~ Nao's here—"

It had been a while since I had last visited the Aihara household, but Chiaki's mom was the same as ever. She yelled in the direction of Chiaki's room, which was located on the second floor, and pulled me through the door without saying anything else.

"U-Urm, well....."

A flurry of footsteps came scuttling down the stairs just as I was about to speak.

Chiaki was wearing a pair of hot pants and a T-shirt—her outfit was so skimpy it hardly felt like it was a winter night. Her half-opened jaws were stuttering for a good five seconds or so, and her face was all red.

"W-W-What are you doing here!? You idiot! How dare you come here!?"

"S-Sorry!"

I reflexively shielded my head with my toolbox; but thankfully,

Chiaki didn't have anything in her hands that she could throw at me.

"Now, no quarrelling at the entrance. You two should go upstairs right now."

That was the only time I had ever felt especially grateful for Chiaki's mom's tough stance. After saying that, she pushed Chiaki and me up the stairs, and there we were, in Chiaki's messy room, surrounded by stacks and stacks of magazines, as well as an air of silence. Chiaki's mom then came in with a tray of drinks and snacks.

"..... Urm, alcohol's a little....." I waved my hands frantically when I saw the bottle of alcohol on the tray.

"Oh, but Chiaki's drinking already."

She's right! Lying on the floor were three mini Shaoxing wine flasks.

"Sheesh, you've done this several times already. You should know that Nao doesn't drink."

Chiaki snatched the plate of snacks and pushed her mom out of the room, along with the tray she was carrying.

But when it was just us again, the room became silent once more. Chiaki grabbed a handful of kaki-pi and dumped them into her mouth in frustration.

What should I do? I couldn't look her straight in the eyes at all.

After finishing the snacks and wine, Chiaki heaved a long sigh and hugged a huge dolphin plushie in her chest.

"..... Mafuyu called."

Said Chiaki softly. I lifted my head in shock. I couldn't see her expression clearly, as the dolphin plushie was covering her face, but it seemed like her eyes were a little wet.

"She said she's heading to America, and that she won't be coming to school again....."

I nodded.

"And she actually said 'sorry.' That's so unfair of her. There's nothing I can say if she apologizes, right?"

Her words stabbed deeply into me.

I had been wondering if I should apologize to Chiaki, but that was an insensitive thought. "Sorry" was a cold, despicable curse that was used to end all forms of communication between people. I gripped the tool in my hand tightly.

"Oh right, what are you here for, Nao? I'm currently..... urm, really drunk, and my mind's in a mess right now. I may just punch you or cry right in front of you, you know?"

I shifted my eyes to the toolbox, then exchanged gazes with Chiaki.

"..... I'm here to fix the record player."

The dolphin plushie slipped off of Chiaki's thighs.

"..... Eh?"

"Your gramophone's broken, isn't it? Think about it. Isn't it silly that you can't listen to a rare present that you've received from me?"

Chiaki looked towards the wall, tongue-tied. Nailed onto the wall with a thumbtack, was a vinyl record. It was <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>.

"E-E-Ehfff?"

It was only then that Chiaki noticed the toolbox next to me.

"Where is it? In the cupboard?"

"A-Ah, well, urm.....!"

Chiaki scooted to her feet and dashed to the cupboard with unsteady steps.

"You can't look inside the cupboard! Turn around!" She was fine with me walking into her messy room, so I had no idea why she was forbidding me from looking inside her cupboard. But I turned my head around anyway.

I opened up my toolbox as I faced the dusty old machine. I first took out a plastic bag filled with replacement parts, then wiped the machine clean with a wet towel.

At first, it was tough working under the scrutiny of Chiaki's unwavering gaze, but not long after, my fingers were already in the mood to fiddle with the machine. I replaced the gramophone's

needle, adjusted the slanted turntable and located the short circuits with a multimeter.

Easy. It's just a machine after all. I just have to fix it if it's broken. But there were lots of things in the world that were irreparable even after being broken.

After checking the spinning turntable with a flick of the switch, I looked in Chiaki's direction.

"I want to check if the sound's alright. May I?"

Chiaki shot a glance at the record on the wall. Her nod was so faint, it was barely detectable by the naked eye.

I borrowed the audio cables of the sound system and connected them to the gramophone, then placed the record on the turntable. A fuzzy feeling arose in my chest the moment I lowered the needle. There was a sweet noise.

Cheers flowed from the boombox. And an irritating guitar phrase followed. Then came the brass instruments that overpowered the harmony of Paul, John and George.

I turned my head towards Chiaki, perhaps with a hint of smugness on my face. Chiaki was hugging her dolphin and beaver plushies, and had curled herself up as though she were trying to hide from something. Her eyes were boring into me—and the spinning turntable as well.

"..... Ah, s-sorry. U-Urm, I'm done."

As I was stretching my hands out to stop the record from spinning,

"Don't switch it off!"

I turned my head around. Chiaki's eyes were visibly filled with tears.

"It's okay. Let it run. I want to listen to it."

Chiaki then tossed a cushion in my direction. It hit my leg and dropped down next to her.

We sat down together and listened carefully to The Beatles amid the noise, amid the illusory concert that was created by stuffing the dreams of four people into a nonsensical joke.

They did hold an actual concert years after the album was produced, but it was held on the roof of a building; and they didn't publicize it, or obtain any permits for it. They disbanded the following year.

I suddenly remembered something Senpai had said some time ago. It's very easy for someone to disappear one day, never to come back again.

She's right. Mafuyu has disappeared. All because of my stupidity.

But even so, Chiaki's still here by my side. Staying beside me.

Why?

"..... Why me? Are there no better guys out there?"

The atmosphere became strange all of a sudden. The music that was flowing out of the boombox suddenly sounded as though it were being produced by some cheap speakers instead. Chiaki sprang up in a really imposing manner, and it was then that I realized what I had said.

"W-W-Wha....."

Chiaki's trembling voice came from above me. I timidly lifted my head, and saw Chiaki's blushing face in-between the dolphin and beaver plushies.

"W-What!? What did you just say!?"



"Urm, no, that's not what I meant..... No actually, I did mean that, but, u-urm....."

The beaver and dolphin plushies suddenly came smashing down on me.

"Idiot! Why do you have to say that at a time like this..... D-Do you even know how much I.....!"

I used my arms to shield my head with all my might. In addition to the furious attack of the plushies, Chiaki was sending flying kicks at me as well. But through the openings in my arms, I could see that Chiaki was really crying.

That further confirmed my suspicions. I had done some really horrible things to Chiaki. She was always behind me, supporting me; she was always there to knock on my tightly shut window; and was always by my side, to the point that I had taken her body warmth for granted. But even so.....

The word "sorry" was a really despicable word, which was why I didn't say anything. Because I was in love with Mafuyu. Even though she was no longer around, I was still so deeply in love with her.

"M-My....."

Pa. pa. The plushies were finally released from Chiaki's hands, and her knees collapsed weakly to the floor. She then gripped my shoulders and moved her face in close, dousing my clothes in her warmth.

"My feelings for Nao....."

Her words were swallowed up by her tears.

At that moment, the banter of the oboe started flowing out of the boombox. It was **<When I'm Sixty-Four>**.

Paul McCartney's feigned youthful voice was causing Chiaki's shoulders to tremble.

Will you still need me, When I'm sixty-four?

And if you say the word, I could stay with you.

I could be handy mending a fuse, when your lights have gone.

When the song entered the second verse, Chiaki's shoulders were trembling even harder; and her hands, that were grasping my shoulders, started to twitch. When Paul reached the part about

scrimping and saving and having grandchildren, Chiaki finally lifted her head.

"—Ahahahahahahaha!"

Chiaki lay on the floor, laughing wildly as she faced the ceiling. She didn't even notice that she was squishing her plushies.

"A-Ahaha, w-what's this? W-Why did it play this song at a time like this? T-This is too much of a coincidence!"

Chiaki was laughing maniacally while rolling on the floor with her curled body. All I could do was look on speechlessly.

It is indeed..... a coincidence.

In the end, Chiaki kept laughing all the way until the end of the song. And when she sat up, her eyes were still red and puffy from the tears, but the gloominess that had shrouded her was gone.

"Ahh~ Sheesh, this is terrible. How did I manage to laugh at a time like this? I don't get it."

After saying that, she wiped the tears away from the corners of her eyes with her fingertip.

"U-Urm, Chiaki—"

"Say no more."

Chiaki's words forced my own back down my throat. There was nothing I could say.

So it's actually true. We humans can look so much more depressed when we're smiling.

"It's okay. I understand."

She understood.

So Chiaki knew there was nothing I could do. That sentence hurt way more than the attack with the plushies and the kicks to my side.

We then sat down, side by side, and listened to the rest of <Sgt.Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band>.

Neither of us said a word. But from the remaining body heat on my shoulders, and the slight pain carved onto my skin, I could tell that Chiaki had already moved forward, to a place that was out of my reach.

Despite the fact that we were sitting beside each other like we usually did, the nameless, illusory warmth that had always existed between us was destroyed on that very night.

So the only thing I could rely on were the songs being spewed out by the record.

The end to the live performance was approaching, and Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band's words of farewell were swallowed up by the cloud-piercing roars of the crowd. It felt as though Mafuyu's footsteps were gradually approaching me. The piano prelude in [<A Day in the Life>](#) made me shed tears again, as it always did.

Even without turning my head, I knew Chiaki was crying again.

Each and every news article sung by John.

The usual busy morning, woven together by Paul.

We had lived through it thousands of times already, and I was sure we would continue to weave it thousands more times. Ordinary but irreplaceable—the cruel everyday life.



"Let's perform live."

I said that when the record was over, and the remnants of the piano were still buzzing faintly around us.

"Even if Mafuyu's no longer around, the three of us still have to get on stage. Let's make this our best performance together."

With her teary eyes fixed on the boombox, Chiaki slowly nodded her head.

And then, the dog whistle—that almost inaudible shrill—rang from the other side, far away.

Chapter 14 - Reindeer, Pajamas, MD

We were still arguing about our stage costumes the day before our performance.

"See, that's the last one. I win."

Kagurazaka-senpai prodded Chiaki's nose as she drew the last fry from the box.

"Why do you sound like you think it's a given that you'd win?"

Said Chiaki in a weeping tone, as she slumped into her chair.

December 23rd. We couldn't use the practice room during winter break, so we were at a studio located on the third floor of the music store Kagurazaka-senpai worked at. The rehearsal was already over, and we had just reached the studio not too long ago. But instead of discussing our performance at the rehearsal, Senpai and Chiaki were rattling on about the costumes and the MC. As for me, I wasn't too pleased about our performance earlier, so I lowered the volume of my bass and played it silently.

"But I've even made the reindeer antlers already!"

Chiaki puffed her cheeks out and put the beautifully-crafted antlers on on both sides of her head. Senpai's proposal of having everyone wear white, clashed violently with Chiaki's proposal of "Santa Claus and reindeers." So they decided to settle it with McDonald's fries. The rule was really simple—the person that picked the last fry won. They said it required some rather complicated strategy (really?), but I was focusing my attention on my bass during their duel. I hardly took any notice of them until Chiaki started yelling when they were down to the last few fries.

"Oh right! You should duel with Senpai too, Nao! It's better if we wear costumes related to Christmas, right?"

"Not interested. Let's start practicing already." Also, no food in the studio.

"You weren't pleased with the rehearsal? Even the producer, who was complaining nonstop prior to it, piped down after listening to our performance."

The organizers weren't pleased when we submitted our application for changing group members after Mafuyu had left the band, though that was something to be expected — because the judges were most impressed by Mafuyu's solo performance during the first stanza of <Happy Xmas>. The three of us rearranged the song in an attempt to convince the organizers we were still worthy of our spot, and in the end, the producer that was hellbent on booting us out of the concert gave in after listening to our rehearsal.

But I still couldn't forgive myself for my immaturity. There was one person amongst the people listening to our rehearsal that was visibly displeased with it—and that was Furukawa, who was performing with us on stage. He probably wasn't used to the shallowness of our timbre with Mafuyu gone.

And so, I let the girls decide on our costumes while I immersed myself back in my Aria Pro II.

"Anyway, it's decided. All white. Comrade Aihara, you can wear hot pants if you want."

"Uhh—Reindeers....."

Despite her reluctance, Chiaki gave in. And I heaved a silent sigh of relief — because the person that was going to be dressed up in the reindeer costume was, without a doubt, going to be me. And if that had turned out to be the case, I probably wouldn't have been able to play due to my embarrassment.

"You've got guts challenging me despite knowing you were going to lose. Are you that insistent on being a Santa Claus?"

"Because I wrote to Mafu-Mafu saying we'd be dressing up as Santa Claus, so she'll have to come down to watch us. I even sent her a ticket."

My fingers stopped strumming in surprise. I turned my head around.

"..... Chiaki mailed her a ticket too?"

Chiaki's eyes widened.

"You too?"

"Yeah, but....."

I was about to say it should be my responsibility, but I swallowed my words. That's really selfish of me.

"If you were gonna give her a ticket, you should've done so by heading to her house without hesitation! Or at the very least, you should've given her a call! You wimp!"

Harsh, but very true. I clamped my bass in-between my knees in dismay.

Ever since that day—

Mafuyu never came back to school, and the second semester had ended just like that. The day before the ending ceremony, Miss Maki had come to me and told me that Mafuyu had already cleared the necessary procedures to quit school.

"That's amazing. So every one of us mailed her a ticket huh."

Murmured Senpai, as she stared blankly into space. So you mailed her one as well?

"Just to let you know, I wrote my name on my ticket. I wonder whose ticket she will bring with her tomorrow. This battle will be quite an interesting one, don't you think?"

Chiaki and I didn't respond.

Mafuyu probably won't be coming. That was my hunch.

And it all ended without any words after that. As the red lights above the door of the studio flashed, signaling the end of our session, we were chased out of the room.



It was pitch black outside, and it was almost nine o'clock. As I looked past the crowded buildings and into the sky, my vision was obscured by the dark clouds that shrouded it. The air was incredibly cold, to the point that my hands felt like they would snap off my wrists if I didn't place them in my pockets. After bidding the store manager goodbye, I walked out of the store and wrapped my scarf around my neck a few times, then tucked it into the collar of my

coat.

"Young man, you're going to give up just like this?"

Asked Senpai, as she sat on the road barrier. The light from the store was shining on Chiaki's face as she stood right next to Senpai; and she too, was staring straight at me.

Senpai had held true to her words about not showing me her smile anymore, but she still interacted with Chiaki the same way she always did, which made things even more painful. Then again, Senpai might be the one hurting even more.

"She's heading to America early next year, right? Why don't you go see her?"

I couldn't give her an answer, so I just stared at my fingers. My skin was all dried up and was peeling off; and since I had used my fingers to strum my bass, the skin on my right hand looked much worse.

"Are you planning to escape into your bass?"

From Kagurazaka-senpai's tone, it didn't sound like she was teasing me or lecturing me. She just wanted to confirm things. I nodded my head honestly.

There wasn't any concrete or sound reason for me to not visit Mafuyu; I just had no idea what expression to put on my face when seeing her. But when I realized I might not get to see Mafuyu again, I became really scared.

Ebichiri said they would need to stay in America for at least two months, which meant she could still return back to school. But Mafuyu changed that plan. One whole year. She was cutting herself off from us for a shockingly long period of time, and I couldn't understand why.

It's because she doesn't want to see me anymore—I refused to think about reasons like that.

So for the past two weeks, I had stayed up late into the night to work on the arrangements as well as the programming of the synthesizer. I had actually become so engrossed in that that I ended up failing three of my subjects. And the strings of my bass had snapped twice as well.

"I won't have to think about Mafuyu as long as I am busy with the band. Isn't that much easier?"—I had thought to myself. But that wasn't the case. Because everything I was doing was to compensate for the broken right wing of feketerigó —t he place that had belonged to Mafuyu.

Whether I was sampling the sounds of my bass using the synthesizer, or discussing how to rearrange the song to make it a single phrase with Senpai, I was always torn apart by the fact that Mafuyu wasn't around anymore.

I couldn't forget about Mafuyu. Not even for a brief moment.

Music was no longer my place for shelter. Instead, I was just forced to cling hard to it while waiting.

"..... The only thing on my mind right now is the live performance. Though I have no idea what I'm going to do after that."

I finally replied, with a hoarse voice.

It's the Christmas concert Mafuyu said we have to perform in.

At the very least, I want to fulfill her wish.

"Nao hasn't grown a single bit."

Said Chiaki, as she shielded her white breaths with her gloved hands. Her legs were swinging about to and fro. I knew she wasn't trying to insult me, but her words stung nevertheless.

"Nope, not necessarily."

Senpai would turn towards Chiaki whenever she was smiling.

"He might have circled back to the place he had come from, but despite being battered, he can stand up on his own two feet now. If that's not called growing up, then I have no idea what is."

"Senpai's still gentle towards Nao, as usual."

"I'm still far off from you, Comrade Aihara."

The two girls were smiling at each other amid their warm radiance, leaving me by myself in the cold night.

Chiaki jumped off the barrier and dusted the dirt off the back of her pants while Senpai went to go retrieve her bicycle from the back of the building.

"Looks like it's precipitating. Will it be snow?"

Murmured Senpai, as she gazed at the starless sky.

"I really want to perform <Happy Xmas>, but I guess it can't be helped."

We had originally planned to use that song for our encore, but we ended up deciding not to perform it at all for the actual concert. Because the original arrangement that we had come up with had Mafuyu's guitar perform a solo in the first phrase, and we couldn't come up with any alternatives.

The smile on Senpai's face disappeared when she looked at Chiaki and me.

"No matter how hard we try, even if we surpass our limits, we can only hit 75% of what feketerigó originally was. It's depressing, but that's the fact of the matter. But even so....."

She stretched out her right hand.

"Let's make it the best Christmas ever."

Chiaki and I nodded as we stacked our hands on top of Senpai's. But the weight and the warmth was lacking. Perhaps Senpai noticed that too, and that was why she stacked her left hand on top of ours.



Back home, Tetsurou and I took turns bathing after I was done fixing him his dinner. I prepared my clothes for the performance as the washing machine was tumbling about. I would be wearing a long-sleeved, open-collared shirt that I had borrowed, and a white suit on top.

I had quite a bit of equipment to bring as well—there was the bass, the effects unit and the synthesizer. I checked the items once more.

Then, I booted up the computer. It was working fine during the rehearsal, but I plugged in my earphones, the effects unit and my bass to make sure it was still working fine.

Crap, I'm not the least bit sleepy. The concert starts at noon tomorrow, so it'd be pretty damn bad if I stayed up all night, snoozed

off in the morning, and ended up oversleeping. But my cheeks were still burning because of the lingering excitement that had remained in my body after the rehearsal and the practice. So I pressed the bass's body against my face. The cold surface was really comfortable.

It felt like I was doing something really stupid, so I opened my window. The heat of my body dropped a little as the cold air blew against my cheeks. The tree—the one Chiaki climbed all the time, and that Mafuyu had used once as well—stood amid the rays of the streetlights. Its leaves were already gone. I could see something white fluttering down between the thin shadows.

Snow. It was snowing.

The only thing moving in the strangely silent night was the illuminated snow floating past the streetlights. The asphalt was still pitch black, but the snow would begin to accumulate as the night continued. I wonder if it'll be okay for the trains to operate tomorrow. Hopefully service won't be halted.

Just as I was about to shut the window because of the bitter cold, I saw a golden silhouette shimmering beneath the streetlights.

I couldn't quite see past the branches of the treetop, so I stretched my head out unconsciously.

I saw right. There's someone there. Someone's outside my courtyard. The skinny person was standing next to the short metal fence, glancing around at his surroundings. Is he looking in my direction? His golden hair shimmered occasionally under the light.

Golden hair?

I pressed my stomach against the window frame and stretched my body out as far as I could without plunging down below.

It was Yuri. And he was carrying something black behind him—a guitar case. Yuri, with a guitar case on his back, was standing between the lamppost and the fence, peeking in my direction. What the hell's he doing here in the middle of a snowy night?

I ran down the stairs, put my shoes on, and dashed out of the house without even putting on a coat. When I was within Yuri's proximity, I saw that he had given up and was about to leave.

"Yuri!"

My voice was surprisingly clear even though it was snowing. The silhouette with the guitar case on his back stopped in its tracks.

"..... Naomi."

Yuri turned around. His face was ghastly white, and his lips were purple. It seemed like he had rushed out of his house in a hurry, as he wasn't wearing a coat.

"W-What the hell are you doing? You'll catch a cold like this!"

"U-Urm, sorry. I am sorry."

I sprinted towards him. Yuri then collapsed into my chest just like that.

"..... I ran here."

What does he mean by that? "It's snowing, so put a coat on at the very least"..... Just as I was about to say that to him, I came into contact with his shivering and icy skin, and realized it wasn't the time to be lecturing him; so I brought him into the house. Tetsurou, fresh out of his bath, was walking out of the changing room just then. "I'll bring you a change of clothes, so get in," I said, as I pushed Yuri into the bathroom. Yuri's clothes were wet because of the snow, so I grabbed my pajamas from the second floor and ran to the kitchen to heat up some water. When I returned to the living room and heaved a sigh of relief, Tetsurou, who was drying his hair with a towel, asked briefly,

"So? What's going on?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Come to think of it, how does he know where I live?

"That's Julien Flaubert, right?"

"Yeah."

"So Nao's abilities as an industry ruffian have already exceeded mine, huh....." What are you talking about?

"Oh yeah, I wonder how much photos of him in the bath will sell for."

"I'm really gonna disown you, yeah?"

"Oh geez, it's just a joke, Nao! Damn, you sure are a possessive little kid."

"Shut up and get back to work!"

While I was chasing Tetsurou around the house with a cushion in my hand, Yuri walked into the living room with a towel wrapped around his head. The pajamas hung loosely on his body.



"Are you okay now? Feeling warmer?"

I tossed the cushion at Tetsurou and urged Yuri to sit down on the

sofa.

"M-Mmm..... thanks."

Yuri's post-bath cheeks were flushed red like an apple. He looked at Tetsurou and lowered his head.

"Sorry for interrupting you so late at night."

"No problem. Oh yeah, remember me? My name's Hikawa Tetsurou. I may not look like it, but I'm a pretty famous critic in the industry. I was the one that wrote the explanatory notes in the program guide when you first came to Japan to perform."

"I was not very good with Japanese back then."

"No problem, don't you mind. Oh right, can you give me an exclusive interview, as well as a coloured cover shot? Your manager's a pain in the ass to deal with."

"Enough with the touting, get back to the study already!"

"Didn't you ask me to get to work? Persistent soliciting, regardless of the time and place, is a basic task for an industry ruffian!"

My head was aching again, so I brought Yuri to my room on the second floor.

"Ah, sorry about that. That's the way my dad is." I scratched my head and sat on the floor.

Yuri, who was sitting on my bed, giggled as he held a steaming cup of water in his hand.

"It is nothing. He is an interesting person, just like Naomi."

Don't say that, even as a joke.

Yuri then scanned the room. "So this is Naomi's room." For some unknown reason, he was swinging his legs about happily. What? Is my room that interesting? I had just moved the synthesizer and my bass out of the room, so there were still a few cables lying around on the floor. I was a little embarrassed by how untidy my room was.

"Your room is full of things related to music. Is this the norm for you?"

"Nope, I was just preparing for the live performance."

The smile on Yuri's face disappeared instantly, and for a long

while, he just sat there, tightly holding his cup.

Actually, I haven't seen Yuri for a while — since that day I went to Shinagawa, in the orchestra's practice room. The same day I last saw Mafuyu. The day our wings were broken.

Perhaps things were already damaged way before that though, and it was just me that was oblivious to everything.

"Tomorrow is..... the live performance, right?"

Yuri placed the cup on his knees and said softly,

"Sorry for coming over all of a sudden. You are not angry, are you?"

"Don't worry about it. But how did you know where my house was?" I didn't remember telling him my address.

"I got it from Kyouko."

Senpai huh. Why? And were they always on such close terms with each other?

"Urm, well, where is my guitar?"

"Ah, I placed it in the corridor downstairs. I'll go get it."

When I brought the guitar case up to my room, Yuri opened it and took something out from inside.

I held my breath.

Blazing beneath the lights was the vintage sunburst-coloured Stratocaster. I only needed a brief look. There was no mistaking it. It was Mafuyu's guitar.

Why is it in Yuri's possession? No wait, that Stratocaster belonged to Yuri in the first place.

"Mafuyu returned this to me. I did not ask for it back."

I lifted my head quickly. Didn't Mafuyu say it was confiscated by Ebichiri? Why's it in Yuri's possession? So she lied? Why?

Yuri hugged the Stratocaster tightly in his bosom and sat down on my bed again.

"..... Mafuyu changed the planned schedule for her treatment. She is probably not returning for a year."

"Mmm, I heard."

And I knew it was Mafuyu's decision as well.

"Also, she said she will be studying there."

"..... Mmm."

Really? Well, I guess it makes sense; she did leave our school already. Mafuyu had already decided to live on the other side of the ocean. In a country where I wouldn't be around.

"Did you hear about the hospital she will be going to?"

"Eh? No." Well, it's not like knowing that would help in any way.

"I heard it is in California, and that it is a university hospital that is famous for its sports medicine."

Sports medicine?

"So they say." Yuri firmly gripped the neck of the Stratocaster and heaved a painful sigh. "Mafuyu injured her wrist because I taught her the wrong way to play the guitar; and the technique put too much strain on her wrist. But it is said that many musicians have visited that hospital in the past."

"So she'll be undergoing therapy there so she can play the piano again?"

"Quite a number of guitarists have also gone there before. I know of a few."

I stared blankly at Yuri's face.

"The strength in Mafuyu's fingers and wrists is very weak, and on top of that, she had learned the wrong technique for playing as well. That is why she has to start over from scratch, so that she can learn the right technique in order to play the guitar once more. That is why she needs a whole year."

The guitar as well?

Why? I couldn't breathe.

Didn't Mafuyu abandon the guitar already? No, but, the Stratocaster's here.

And 75% of feketerigó is still around.

"So she did not tell Naomi about it."

Yuri's voice sounded like it was close to tears.

"I did ask Mafuyu why she was keeping it a secret from Naomi and leaving just like that."

I moved my body towards Yuri and asked,

"What did Mafuyu say? What did she say?"

Why don't you ask her yourself, you useless wimp? — A voice reverberated painfully inside my mind.

"She refused to say anything. I do not know, I have no idea. Because even though Mafuyu likes Naomi so much..... Even though she could return in just two months to be together with Naomi again..... Wouldn't that be great? But Mafuyu, she....."

Yuri sobbed as he hugged the Stratocaster tightly. I collapsed to the floor.

Why? At that very moment, Mafuyu had finally clearly conveyed her feelings to me. Getting the piano back and returning to my side was not enough. Mafuyu was a quarter of feketerigó as well. She loved the band very, very much.

Even if she has to be separated in another country for an unimaginable amount of time.

She has to get her wings back.

"Why? There is no need for her to leave silently like this. I hate it. Mafuyu and Naomi both look so sad, I do not want to see you two like this."

"That's because....."

I had done something really horrible to Mafuyu.

I thought Mafuyu would never be coming back again.

"She will definitely come back! Naomi you idiot! Don't you understand that much?"

Yuri dumped the Stratocaster on the bed, then jumped off the bed and landed in front of me. He leaned forward, with his eyes filled with tears, and put his hands on my knees.

"She is doing her best so that she can return, so that she can play

the guitar once more. Why? Why is Naomi always like this? Why can you not just do your best to see her, even if it is not possible? She will be leaving Japan soon, there is not much time left to see her, you know?"

I understand what you're saying. But.....

"When are you going to muster the courage you need? If all you are doing is waiting, you will never be able to gather the necessary courage!"

Yuri's words hit me really hard on the head, and I almost fainted. I knelt down at the edge of my bed, my hands on the ground.

Mafuyu's doing it all for the guitar and the sake of the band.

So that she can soar above my pulsations once more?

But Mafuyu didn't tell me that. Is it because she's scared that everything may fail? Or is it because she lacks the courage, just like me?

If so, then both of us are doing some incredibly stupid things.

I could feel the warmth of another body behind me. Yuri had buried his face into my back.

"I am sorry, Naomi."

"..... Why are you apologizing?"

Human beings would never improve the tiniest bit if they had to apologize for calling an idiot an idiot.

But Yuri's warmth slowly left my back. I suddenly heard a zipping sound, and when I turned around, Yuri had already packed the guitar back into its case.

"I cannot stand it. I should not be the one telling you this. Mafuyu is just as silly, just as cowardly and just as stubborn. But I like Mafuyu, and I like Naomi too. It hurts so much. I become all fidgety whenever I think about how everything is my fault, but I could not hold back any longer when Mafuyu returned the guitar to me. So I asked Kyouko to tell me your address, and I ran here."

I shook my head. It wasn't Yuri's fault, but I had no intention of consoling him with those empty words.

"But Naomi is as dense as usual. All you are thinking about is the concert."

Sorry about that — I responded on reflex.

"I promised Mafuyu that I'd make this the best live performance ever. She definitely wouldn't forgive me if I were to deliberately play badly. So....."

"That is just you being pointlessly stubborn."

Stubborn? Did he call me stubborn? That's right. I stood up and pulled a MD (minidisc) out of the pocket of my guitar case and slotted it into the audio system.

"..... What is this?" Yuri walked over to me and peeked at the system.

"The recording for today's rehearsal."

The proof of my stubbornness.

The harmony of Chiaki's hi-hats and Senpai's plucking of the guitar began to play, and came closer and closer as if it were the sound of a bell. The baseline was vibrant, and the toms carved out an ethnic rhythm while the melody line of the synthesizer was modulated to its utmost limit.

Yuri dropped to the floor.

How ironic. What was originally supposed to be played by four people giving it their all, sounded depressingly clear when the head count was reduced to three.

Yuri picked up my bass that was lying on the floor.

Countless numbers of times, I had become depressed after witnessing and listening to the superb performances of people like Kagurazaka-senpai, Mafuyu and Furukawa; but those blows were nothing compared to what I was feeling at that very moment. Yuri's slender fingers were skipping around, reproducing the melody of my bass to perfection while pacing themselves impeccably to the feketerigó that was flowing out of the MD.

"Your technique has improved, Naomi."

It didn't sound like he was praising me, so I wasn't the least bit happy. If only these geniuses could be locked in a glass case

forever, never to come out.

"Because you have placed everything related to Mafuyu aside and focused on practicing."

"Just shut up. It'll be even more amazing at the actual performance! Come down and see for yourself if you're free tomorrow."

I grumbled in chagrin. Yuri stuck out his tongue.

"I do have a break tomorrow, but there is no way I will be attending the concert."

Ah, is that so? Fine then. I was throwing a tantrum in my mind, so I remained quiet.

"Because there is only the three of you on stage, the performance should not be too different from this recording, right?"

Nope, don't you underestimate a live performance. But I remained silent.

"The MD is more than enough. But why is the quality so good?"

"Because I first record the sounds of the band with the effects unit. Then, when the system is done reading and processing these sounds, the synthesizer plays them back. So all I have to do is hook the MD up to the synthesizer, and I can record things really easily."

Oh—an uninterested expression appeared on Yuri's face, and he shifted his gaze to my bass. He then heaved a sigh and stood up.

"..... Well then, I will be leaving, as Naomi has to wake up early tomorrow."

"Eh? Wait, hold on. Your clothes aren't dried yet, you know? And it's still snowing heavily outside....."

Yuri opened his eyes wide and stared at the pajamas on his body. He's not planning to leave dressed in that is he?

"Urm, well, but....."

"Why don't you just crash here for the night, Julien Flaubert? Nao and I are the only people living in this house, so there's no need for you to be concerned. Hey Nao, get moving! Clear the floor and lay a futon down!"

"When the hell did you start eavesdropping, Tetsurou!?"

I threw a pillow at the gap in the opened door. Heh, heh, heh—the disgusting laughter moved to the floor below. That bastard.

I glanced at Yuri, and Yuri lifted his eyes to look at me.

"..... Is it really okay for me to stay?"

My heart will skip a beat if you ask me that while wearing that expression of yours.

"M-Mmm."

After pushing all the luggage for the live performance into a corner of the room, I laid a futon on the floor and looked at the time. It's about time for the last train to depart. There's a live rehearsal tomorrow as well, so I'll have to get up early.

Goodnight—I said softly, as I switched off the light and squeezed under the blanket. Various sounds from earlier that day were swirling about in my head. *"Young man, you're going to give up just like this?"* asked Senpai. *"Nao hasn't grown a single bit,"* commented Chiaki irritably. The sound of the heartbeat created by the harmony of the hi-hat and the bass. The slew of irritating requests made by the organizers. The train skidding across the icy railway.

"—Naomi."

Someone called out my name all of a sudden, so I pulled my blanket down.

In the darkness, I could see Yuri sitting up on the futon .

"What's up?"

"Can I sleep on your bed?"

It was dark, so he probably couldn't see the stupid, dumbfounded expression on my face.

"W-W-Why?"

Is it too cold? Does he want to swap beds?

"Naomi will not just disappear, will you?" Yuri's voice was filled with unrest. "I am so scared. You will not disappear like Mafuyu, right? It feels like everyone..... everyone will disappear when I close my eyes. It is so frightening."

"I won't disappear. I'm right here."

I was troubled by Yuri's unfounded unease.

"Y-You are not..... angry at me, are you? You do not hate me, do you? B-Because..... it is all..... it is all my fault. Mafuyu must feel the same as well. If only I had not taught her the guitar....."

At a distance not far away from my arm, Yuri buried his face in the blanket and remained silent.

It isn't Yuri's fault—there was no way I could say that. Because that was a lie. The reason Mafuyu's right hand was broken was because Yuri had taught her the wrong method of playing the guitar.

But I stroked Yuri's silky hair gently.

"I never would've met Mafuyu if Yuri hadn't taught her how to play the guitar."

And Senpai too. And of course, I wouldn't have met Yuri either.

And I wouldn't have known the blazing passion of the stage, or the sweet taste of searing hot sweat.

Or the true beauty of music.

"I'm not angry. And Mafuyu probably feels the same as well. There's no way she would hate Yuri."

"—Really?"

"Yeah."

"But I am still scared. I am afraid that everyone will disappear when I wake up."

Yuri grasped my wrist tightly and let out a painful moan. I heaved a sigh. What a headache. He's just like a kid. No wait, actually, he still is one. And I am too. Yuri was a year younger than me, so, based on his age, he was only a middle school student.

"Mmm, s-sure, if you want. But my bed's really small."

Yuri squeezed his petite body into my bed, and I heard him let out a sob.

Well, it's not a big deal since we're both guys, but I'm still a little nervous nonetheless. I turned away so that my back was facing Yuri.

"..... Naomi....."

He muttered my name weakly, his breath caressing my neck.

The warmth of his body was also gently pressing into my back.

Can I really fall asleep like this? I began to worry about things that were totally different from what I was worrying about a little while ago. Then again, he *is* French, and he did mention that he used to sleep in the same bed with Mafuyu before. Perhaps he's just used to doing this all the time. It must be a difference in culture.

I guess I shouldn't be worrying about things like this either. The only thing I need to think about is tomorrow's live performance.

Surprisingly, all the noises that were swirling around in my head gradually disappeared, as though they were being sucked away by Yuri's warmth.

Finally, I surrendered peacefully to my drowsiness.

Chapter 15 - Snow, Footlights, Knot

When I woke up, I found myself being embraced by a pair of slender arms wrapping around me from my back to my chest. What's going on here? When I turned my body around under the blanket, the tip of my nose came into contact with soft, silky hair. Right in front of my eyes, was a cute and angelic sleeping face. I was about to retreat in shock, but Yuri let out a nasal "mmm" moan and buried his face into his arm.

Oh right, it's Yuri. We slept together last night. He might've been a guy, but waking up to a body as slender as his in bed, and seeing a face that was so incredibly feminine appear right in front of my eyes—it really wasn't good for my heart.

Moving carefully so as to not wake Yuri up, I slowly moved my body out of his arms and got off the bed. A chilly, creaking sound moaned from the floor. I had no idea what time it was, as it was still pretty dark, but the display of the sound system showed that it was nine o'clock. Well, if it's still dark, that means..... As I pulled the curtains apart, my eyes were blinded by the snow-white world. My barely awake body started shivering in response to the freezing cold. The roads, the roofs of the houses, and our courtyard and fence were all covered in snow, and fragments of the sky were slowly fluttering downwards from the grey clouds.

It's a white Christmas.

For some reason, everything before my eyes seemed unreal. I wouldn't have been surprised if everything, starting from when Yuri had come to my house, had just been a dream. But when I stretched my hand outside the window, my body heat was undeniably drained away as my skin came into contact with the silent chill of the air.

Layer by layer, my drowsiness was peeled away from me. When I closed the windows and turned my body around, I could still see the blonde boy sleeping on my bed. This isn't a dream. Not Yuri, not the

snow, and not the performance we'll be giving later today.

Guess I should leave earlier today, since it'll take a fair bit of effort to get to the venue in this heavy snow. After I finished changing into my performance attire, I heaved the bass and the synthesizer onto my back and walked out of the room. Even just walking that short distance down the narrow stairs made me feel like my back was about to break. Yuri said he would be taking a break today, so I guess it would be better to not wake him up, as he should be pretty drained.

"Oh, morning, Nao. Did you have a fantastic night?"

"And here I am, wondering why the hell you're up this early, Tetsurou..... Rather than saying idiotic things like that, shouldn't you be doing something else instead? There are lots of chores for you to do, aren't there? Like the laundry, for example."

I threw a towel at Tetsurou's scruffy face, which had popped out of the living room.

"I'm really busy in the morning. There are children's shows and anime waiting to be watched."

I was in no mood to reply to that, so I walked weakly towards the kitchen instead. I had no intention of wasting my energy on pointless things like that, since it was the day of the performance.

"What about Julien Flaubert? Is he still asleep?"

"Yeah. He said he'd be resting today, so cook him something when he wakes up, then send him to the station."

"Can we hold a photo shoot session in our house? No no no I'm just kidding! Nao! Don't put on such a frightening expression when you're holding a knife in your hand!" Tetsurou scooted back into the dining room. "Speaking of which, I thought he was going to the concert with you. Isn't that why he came here?"

"Nope, he told me he's not going."

Oh?—Tetsurou scratched his tilted head and left just like that.

I know Yuri's angry. He's probably not interested in the feketerigó without Mafuyu, regardless of whether we play well or not. It's the same for me as well. But if that's true, why am I still standing on the

stage? Even though only the three of us are left.

Am I just being stubborn, like Yuri said?

Or am I just doing it to savour the sweet excitement of the performance?

Or to bathe myself in the glittering stage lights and the cheers?

It might've been for all those reasons, or for none of those reasons at all. But our forefathers had left us a magical curse, one that could explain everything in any given situation.

If you asked me why, it was because it was rock 'n' roll.



After I finished breakfast, I prepared for the weather by putting on a raincoat over my windbreaker, and wrapped the cases for the bass and the synthesizer with huge plastic bags as well.

The sky was a little brighter when I walked out of the house, but the snow was showing no signs of stopping. The snow was fine, as it was precipitating at a pretty low temperature, so my boots sank halfway into it when I stepped out of the door. It wasn't exactly impossible to walk, but I was carrying a lot of equipment with me. I was seriously regretting not leaving the synthesizer at the venue after the rehearsal the day before.

As I walked out of the courtyard, I was greeted by Chiaki, who was waiting for me. As the drummer, she didn't have to bring anything with her, so she was holding an umbrella instead. Perhaps as a tiny rebellion against Senpai's decision regarding the outfits, Chiaki was wearing a red coat that reminded me of Santa Claus.

"Morning! Pass me the synthesizer."

"I was going to meet you at your house."

"You'd have to wait a hundred years to be earlier than me."

Smiled Chiaki, as she snatched the synthesizer case away from my hands. I originally wanted to offer her the bass instead, as the synthesizer was much heavier, but she was already walking swiftly towards the station with the synthesizer on her back.

"Did you get a good night's sleep? Nao's the type that would think

about all sorts of things the night before a performance."

"Ah, yeah."

I had thought it was going to be a given that I wouldn't be able to sleep with Yuri pressing against my back, but for some reason, I had actually slept really well. Perhaps it was because feeling the warmth of another human being had made me feel at ease. But that was something I was never going to say to Chiaki.

"I guess I won't be able to rehearse, thanks to these frozen hands."

"You just have to stick the drumsticks to your hands using chewing gum or something."

"Ahaha, why doesn't Nao stick his mouth shut with chewing gum as well?"

"I can't sing if I do that."

"You can hum the song instead."

Strange, why am I feeling calmer as we approach the performance venue? Mafuyu's probably not coming, so there's no way we'd be able to convey our rock music to her. And even though I know that..... No wait, perhaps it's precisely because I know?

I wanted to tell Chiaki what I had heard from Yuri—the things about the hospital Mafuyu would be going to—but I couldn't find the opportunity to tell her amidst our banter.

The club we would be carrying out our battle in, was located in the basement of the largest entertainment center in our city.

The shopping complex was filled with people despite the heavy snow outside. I could hear <Jingle Bells> being played amidst the background noise coming from the shopping mall's entrance, which was decorated with flashing lights. Chiaki and I walked out of the station, both of us covered with sweat. It felt like the sweat on my forehead was freezing as the chilling wind blew past the corridor.

We walked down the escape stairs and into a private corridor, then passed through a door with a "Staff Only" sign to enter the backstage. I could see her back and her long braided, black hair amid the workers that were busily running about with earphones on

their heads—Kagurazaka-senpai was already there.

Standing next to her were also two men that I recognized: the muscular, tanned guy was Tomo, and the tall one with blonde hair was Hiroshi of Melancholy Chameleon, Furukawa's partner. What's Hiroshi doing here?

"Morning, everyone. Pass your instruments to the staff. They'll take care of them."

Said Senpai suddenly, as she turned her body around. Even though her back had been facing us, Senpai had noticed our presence before even Tomo or Hiroshi did.

Speaking of which, Senpai's attire was pretty shocking. Despite the heavy snow outside, she was wearing a miniskirt and a tube top that revealed her arms and her belly button. And to top it off, she was even wearing a pair of white boots as well. Her outfit was completely and uniformly white. All she needed was a laser gun, and she would've looked like a heroine that had stepped out of a B-rated science fiction movie.

"Whoa! Won't you be cold in that, Senpai?"

"I'll be releasing an unbearable amount of heat both inside and outside my body later on. Comrade Aihara, you should take off your coat as well."

Chiaki's red coat was removed from her body in an instant. You're wearing a white tube top as well, aren't you? I don't even know where I should be looking.

"Nao's the only one that's not dressed to kill."

Shrugged Tomo in disappointment.

"You might as well play the bass behind the stage. The band would be much more popular with the crowd if only Kyouko and Chiaki were on stage."

Teased Hiroshi, snickering as he rubbed salt into the wound.

"Urm, well, why are you here?"

Tomo's presence there was understandable, as he was a performing member—but why is Hiroshi here?

"That Taisei, he wanted me to be both the emcee and the chorus

for his performance. He said something like he's used to the way I talk, so it's much easier to stage the show with me. It's not like I'm a comedian or anything."

Hiroshi grimaced. What, so it's the usual bunch we're used to seeing. We didn't see any of the other performers yesterday, as we had headed straight to the studio right after finishing the rehearsal.

"Well then Kyouko, see you later."

Hiroshi and Tomo disappeared past the curtains that led backstage. Is Furukawa there as well? I still wasn't very good at dealing with him, so I was lucky we hadn't immediately bumped into him.

"You two, come here."

Senpai motioned at us to follow her as she walked to the side of the stage where the footlights were located.

The club had a pretty weird layout. I couldn't quite understand it even though it was already my third time there. Between the ground and the incredibly high ceiling, were multiple levels of dance floors, which made it look just like one of Escher's deceptive drawings. Additionally, there were small "islands" connected by multiple flights of stairs, as well as two large hexagonal stages located really high up.

"We should be able to see everything since we'll be performing so high up in the air. We'll spot her immediately if she comes."

Who is she referring to? Neither Chiaki or I asked her that question.

If it's Senpai, she should be able to spot the sapphire eyes and the maroon-coloured hair, even while performing amidst the darkness and the dancing spotlights.

But all three of us knew there was the possibility that she wouldn't even show up.

Even though we had entered the club, my feelings were as calm as before. "Is it because of the snow?"—I thought to myself. It felt as though all of my feelings had been sucked away by the pure white world.

All Christmas songs were songs about departures. Perhaps that's why.

And so, in the depths of the mall, despite being stuck in a sticky mire of darkness, under the heat of the crowd and the lights that were scratching against my skin, it felt like my chest was burning up once more.

I hope you will come.

I want to see you.

I want to see you, Mafuyu.



The four rhythmic strikes of the bass drum shook the walls and the ceiling, and the footsteps of the crowd, as well as the roaring cheers, were seeping through the concrete.

Different from the cramped live house, the club had an actual preparation room located backstage along the corridor, one that was about half a classroom wide. On the right side of the room was a desk, and on the left, well-arranged cabinets. A lot of performers were around, so the room was filled with instruments, costumes, sound systems and people.

As we were going up on stage next, we planted ourselves close to the exit. Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai were chatting with the men from the hip hop group performing right after us. High school students? For real? I heard rumours about an incredible group during the auditions, so that's you guys? How about a drink after the concert? Good idea, let's go out next time. They were blatantly trying to hook up with the girls, but I wasn't paying any attention to what was happening around me. Instead, I was just sitting on a chair, quietly listening to the vibrations coming from the stage while hugging one of my knees.

But there was no way I could've known whether Mafuyu was there or not just by doing that.

Perhaps it's better that I don't know. I should just allow time to flow past me as I become blinded by the footlights and stage lights, and carry the beautiful illusion that she might've been here into my

dreams.

The performances of the two groups before us were about to end. Aside from the interjections by the emcees and the interludes of the DJs, the performances of the six groups were supposed to flow one after another without interruption. That was why two separate stages had been prepared for the performers, so that the group waiting could get on stage early and would have ample time to prepare themselves for their performance.

It's about time for us to go.

The door to the preparation room suddenly opened, and I stood up. A female staff member popped her head through the door and said,

"Mr. Hikawa from feketerigó, someone's outside looking....."

Senpai and Chiaki, who were behind me, reacted way quicker than I did; they pushed their chairs away and sprang up in an instant. My knees were trembling. Could it be Mafuyu?

When I was walking towards the corridor, a small silhouette dashed towards me.

"Naomi!"

Blonde hair came flying out from under the hood of a coat, and a pair of red ears and the red tip of his nose followed. I was extremely confused. Yuri? And it wasn't just him. Leaning against the wall of the corridor, brushing snow off his overalls, was—

"U-Uncle Tetsurou?"

Chiaki let out a weird shriek when she ran into the corridor.

"Yo! I'm here to see your performance, Chiaki!"

Tetsurou, with his scruffy face and disheveled hair, waved his hands with a smile.

Why? Why are Tetsurou and Yuri here?

"W-Well, I got him to drive me here since I could not reach Naomi through your phone."

Said Yuri, as he hugged me tightly. Tetsurou drove him here? Why did he do that? And didn't you say you wouldn't be watching our

performance?

"Maestro Ebisawa just gave me a call."

I held my breath. Kagurazaka-senpai pushed Chiaki behind her and walked to my side.

"He said they have managed to get the tickets on the waiting list, and will be heading out on the four o'clock flight."

It felt like my head was buried in snow or something—it took me quite a while to comprehend what Yuri had said. Four o'clock flight? What does he mean by that? Four in the afternoon, today?

Isn't that in two hours?

"Why so suddenly!?"

Chiaki questioned Yuri from behind me.

"The Maestro saw the tickets for the performance," said Yuri in tears. "He was afraid Mafuyu would change her mind, so he booked the tickets immediately."

The tickets we had given her. Oh right, Ebichiri's on a break starting today.

Mafuyu, she..... In just two hours, she'll be taking off for the other side of the ocean.

It was only then that I started feeling a sharp pain in my body, as though half of my body was being forcefully pulled apart from the other half. I knew it was coming sooner or later, but it didn't feel real at all. It was farewell.

"Naomi, g-get to the airport right now!"

Yuri pushed my chest hard.

"Young man, it'll take an hour and thirty-seven minutes to reach the airport." "It's only two o'clock right now!"

I looked at Senpai and Chiaki in disbelief. What..... What are you two talking about?

"..... I won't..... be going."

A voice of feigned toughness.

"Naomi? Why are you still being stubborn at a time like this—"

"Our performance is about to start!"

"What..... What are you saying, you idiot!? Seeing Mafuyu is way more important....."

"But this is a live performance. There's no way I'm going to abandon my band at a time like this."

"I will do it then!"

Yuri pushed himself away from me all of a sudden and looked at Chiaki, Senpai, and me—the three members of feketerigó.

"I will play the bass. You should have heard it before, Naomi. I know how to play everything..... everything. And I play it better than Naomi does. S-So Naomi, you should....."

I had no idea where the strong emotions surging inside me were coming from, but I grabbed Yuri by the collar and slammed him against the wall of the corridor. Even Tetsurou was stunned.

"Nao.....mi....."

Yuri arched his body in pain.

I did remember hearing it once before. Yuri could easily replicate the melody of my bass after listening to it just once. For him, it was as easy as rolling oranges with the tips of his fingertips. But still.

"Don't you underestimate feketerigó."

A deep and murky voice.

"Yuri's bass may be a hundred times better than mine, but I am the only person that knows how to control the effects unit, and the only person that can harmonize with Senpai's melody from below."

With Chiaki's support, I was the only person that could make the heart beat. But the only person that could lift us into the sky was Mafuyu. And only Mafuyu.

Mafuyu is..... the only person that can do that.

My fury lost its strength, and my hands dropped down. A hand gently grabbed my shoulder and pushed me aside. The person then went to support Yuri's body, which was about to collapse to the floor.

It was Kagurazaka-senpai.

"..... S-Sorry, but, but, I..... Mafuyu and, Naomi, they....."

Yuri began sobbing in Senpai's arms while I just stared at my own hands. What the heck did I just do? What was the point of venting my anger out on Yuri?

However, even though I had said all that in the heat of the moment..... it was all true.

"Young man."

Senpai gently caressed Yuri's hair and asked me softly,

"You won't regret this?"

I sank my fingernails deep into my palm. I hadn't fully suppressed my unreasonable anger just yet. What's with that? Why does this person always have to evaluate me in such a dramatic manner?

"Of course I will!" My voice was steaming. "Whether I go or not, I'll definitely regret it. But.....!"

The gazes coming from everyone were incredibly painful, so I threw my words at my feet.

"This is Mafuyu's band, a place she can return to to play the guitar once more. So there's no way I'd ever forsake this place!"

"Mafuyu..... her guitar? W-What do you mean by that? Hey, Nao!"

Chiaki approached me and shook my shoulders hard. Ahhh, I said it. Mafuyu had planned to keep it a secret forever, but I said it. But of course. There's no need to keep it a secret, yeah?

Aren't we comrades that are tied together by an existence called Mafuyu? Aren't we feketerigó, four people that share the same blood and soar in the sky as one?

I told everyone everything—including why Mafuyu went to the hospital, why she quit school, and why she chose to stay in America for an extended amount of time.

All of Mafuyu's plans.

Chiaki grabbed my arms and sunk her fingers into my skin in anguish.

"..... That's just silly. Mafuyu and Nao are both silly. I can't understand you two at all!"

She rubbed her temple with her fist as she said that.

The footsteps above our heads were becoming more chaotic as time passed, and the cheers were increasingly getting louder. I could hear the emcees rattling on and on, stirring up the excitement of the audience. Chiaki drew her drumsticks out from the back of her belt and held them in her right hand. She then shot me a glance, and made her way down the corridor, towards the noises that were rumbling down the stairs.

"Let's get going, young man."



With his hands pressed against the wall, Yuri was staring at me with eyes that were filled with all his pent-up emotions.

I said nothing. I just wished for him to listen to our performance. If he listens to the live performance, I should be able to convey to him the things that could never be conveyed through the recorded rehearsal.

I then turned around and began sprinting towards Chiaki and Senpai amidst the sound of the rumbling.



The B stage's lights were off, so we had to be careful not to trip over the wires as we set up our instruments and equipment. Tomo and Furukawa offered their help, as they were the previous group that performed on that stage.

Meanwhile, on the A stage, the members of the performing vocal group were swaying their bodies along to a funky melody, but their harmony was nevertheless solid.

The stands were finally all set up and ready, so I slung my bass over my shoulder and knelt down beside the effects unit to try to calm myself down.

But someone suddenly kicked me in the butt, causing me to fall forward into the legs of the microphone stand. When I crawled up and turned my body around, I realized a pair of sharp eyes located beneath a bandanna was staring at me. It was Furukawa.

"So that lass ain't coming after all?"

"B-Because..... I told you before, didn't I? Mafuyu won't be playing the guitar anymore."

"Who gives a damn about that? I was looking forward to hearing her perform."

He was hoping Mafuyu would come. Just as I thought, Furukawa was displeased with my performance at yesterday's rehearsal.

"That's right. I thought she was going to show herself at the actual performance, since there was two weeks for her to learn and memorize the correct method of playing the guitar. And then your band's shallow performance would return back to normal."

It's impossible..... for such a miracle to occur.

"So it'll just be the same performance as yesterday? That's not even worth listening to."

I shifted my gaze away from Furukawa's body.

And at the same time, I crossed sights with Kagurazaka-senpai, who was adjusting the height of her microphone stand. From the bitter expression on her face, I assumed she had heard my conversation with Furukawa.

The only thing the three of us could do to fill in the gaps left behind by Mafuyu, was modify my and Senpai's guitar parts. That was all. It was nothing more than a quick fix.

"You guys were at your best at the auditions, yeah? I have no idea why you guys insist on performing on stage."

Furukawa disappeared behind the stage after leaving us those harsh words.

Even so, the only thing we could do was perform.

Despite the fact that we could only achieve 75%, even if we pushed our capacity and capabilities to their limits.

The cheers swelled and exploded, and the dance beats that were hitting my organs had come to a halt as the lights on the A stage turned blue. I could clearly see the performers in their finishing pose.

The emcees then began chatting at a clear tempo, though I wasn't quite sure what language they were speaking. It sounded like a rap, and I could sort of make out the word 'feketerigó' buried in their sentences.

I shot a glance at Senpai, who was standing in front of Chiaki, and the three of us exchanged gazes for a brief instant. As the semiquavers began playing on the hi-hat, I firmly gripped my bass and moved towards the microphone stand. Everything started with the clear tones of the chord strokes, which were followed by the entanglement of the toms.

I began knocking my fingertips against the strings of the bass. Restlessness began to rise. Fractured syncopations.

Kagurazaka-senpai's powerful scream split the dark, blue oceans apart, igniting the flames with a blinding light.

Before me, hundreds of men and women were shaking their hair about with bloodshot eyes, as though they were dancing in asphyxiation. The waves of the bass coming from my fingers were sending high-voltage pulses into their hearts, vanquishing the sluggishness in their bodies.

I squeezed the lowest part of the bass's neck and allowed the bass line to gnaw its way into the treble. Following the instructions I had given it, the effects unit began to combine, analyse, and broaden the chord strokes of Kagurazaka-senpai's guitar. The result was an explosive outburst of light from the electric organ and the phase-shifted string instrument. But the rain of light was sucked in the opposite direction into a black hole—the cloudy area just beneath Senpai's vocals, the place where Mafuyu's guitar was supposed to burst apart.

There's no way we could fill that up. How could that be possible?

I came to that painful realization yet again as I plucked the strings of my bass. But it felt like I was plucking my blood vessels instead.

Mafuyu's not here.

I wish you could be here together with us right now, beneath the skies of the burning rain. But Mafuyu was nowhere to be found.

Is it because I'm trying to carve that unbearably painful and depressing truth into my ears, my eyes and each and every inch of my skin? Is that why I'm allowing the arrangement to become mashed up and the effects unit to go crazy, all so that I can ram my sound into Senpai's voice?

It was just as Yuri and Chiaki had said. I'm a hopeless idiot.

A large hole appeared in my heart; and in a half-hearted response to that, I increased the tempo of my music. My blood was spewing wildly, and the wound was getting larger and larger.

But the only thing I could do was continue singing. There was no way Senpai or Chiaki could see me crying, and of course, there was no way the audience could see either. But if I stopped singing for even a brief second, my voice would become seared by my tears, never to make a sound again.

So I continued singing and allowed the breeze from the ventilators

to streak past my wet cheeks.

At the same time, my sense of reality was stripped away from my limbs. Each and every one of the wildly dancing audience members was like a cell in my body, and as the tired cells were removed, new cells grew in their place, lusting for blood as they soaked up vitality.

I guess this is how God must've felt.

But even so, I have no need for this.

At that moment, all I had to do was tug at the invisible strings arranged orderly in the air, and I could drag out the one singing voice that I yearned for while standing above the thousands of people. Even if it was the one that was hoarse, and whose lungs were shriveled up, and body, reduced to dust.

But I didn't need any of that.

All I wanted was to see Mafuyu.

I want to see her. I want to see her so badly—



"—Young man!"

I lifted my head up and swatted away the darkness that was engulfing me. Before I had even realized, I had fallen to my knees, with my hands tightly gripping the microphone stand.

What's going on here? The lights were splitting my face into two. Is our performance not over yet? I turned my head slightly and saw Kagurazaka-senpai looking at me with a sorrowful expression on her face. Her hand was sitting atop my shoulder.

"Young man, can you still continue? Can you stand?"

When did I fall to my knees? We had already finished playing the fifth song of our medley, the song in which I was the lead vocal, and Senpai's guitar solo was the accompaniment to the fugue..... So why can I still hear the beats and the piano riffs? And there's an avalanche of footsteps and applause coming from beneath my feet?

I turned my head around and saw Chiaki sitting at the well-illuminated drum set, her hair swaying wildly as she powered the engine into rotation. I shivered.

The effects unit read the tempo of Chiaki's toms and converted it into a faint harmony of the piano and the xylophone.

"Young man, it's time for our encore! The A stage isn't done preparing yet, so we'll be extending our performance. Get up on your feet!"

Encore? You want me to bleed even more? Are you trying to make me puke out the liquefied bones and organs inside me? But..... But I'm in such great pain already. What else can I sing? Mafuyu's no longer around. And regardless of the song we choose, in our hearts, all we'll be doing is confirming the fact that she's no longer with us—

Just then, we found our answer—me, from Senpai's eyes; and her, from my lips.

Really?

Senpai asked me silently.

Can we really do it?

I wasn't sure if we nodded our heads in agreement, but we both turned our heads around and looked at Chiaki. I knocked the body of my bass twice with three of my fingers, and Chiaki blinked hard in response. Even with the loss of our right wing, we were still a bird with a single wing. We needed no words to communicate with each other.

The right hand was raised up high; and it grabbed onto the semiquavers that were busily filling up the club air and tore them away in one go.

The toms, the piano and the glittering decorations that were scattered around the melody disappeared in an instant. The audience, tired from their dancing, was suddenly left alone in the snow. They looked up at the cloudy sky in confusion, and at that moment, a faint tingling sound appeared—Chiaki's hi-hat came in playing beats in 6/8.

Senpai and I didn't lift our fingers. And we didn't sing either.

But I heard it.

And Senpai and Chiaki should have heard it too. It was <Happy Xmas>.

I could hear the melody that Mafuyu carved out with her Stratocaster using all her strength. It might've been nothing more than an illusion; or perhaps it was memories of the past slumbering inside the program of the effects unit, that could only be awakened by Chiaki's light bells on this very night.

But we weren't the only ones that could hear that sound.

The singing voices coming from beneath my feet that permeated the air, and the singing of Mafuyu's Stratocaster to liven up that Christmas Eve—both of them overlapped together to herald in another melody. And in came the singing voices of the children, praying for the end of wars.

I could actually hear it. The tired couples hummed along to the song that was composed of only two verses as it reverberated in the night sky. They didn't know Mafuyu's name. And they should've never heard Mafuyu's guitar before.

But we weren't the only ones who heard it.

Mafuyu's here.

Mafuyu's really here.

After the first chorus was over, Senpai and I walked slowly towards our microphones. Chiaki's fill-ins were supporting Senpai's chord strokes as they soared high into the air, and my bass was hitting hard in Chiaki's shadow.

After the main chorus had finished, Senpai began crooning into the mike. I had planned to join in as her harmony, but I couldn't make a sound. My throat had been burned by my acid-like tears. I could clearly hear Mafuyu's guitar right above the pulsations I carved out, nestled in-between Kagurazaka-senpai's chord strokes. The voice that I had long lost, that I could never get back again.

No, can I get it back? What should I do?

While we were still singing on that stage, Mafuyu had already begun her journey. But none of us needed to exchange any words of confirmation with each other. Music was a flame that would emit its rays of light wherever it wanted to, regardless of the distance. But doing just that would only result in leaving an imprint of a white silhouette in the eyes. That was just how fragile and delicate feelings

were if you couldn't convert them into words.

So we sing.

That's why singing is the source of all music, regardless of the age or the nation we're in. Singing is the forerunner that strings everything together, and that burns it all apart.

In the end, under the guidance of Senpai's singing, thousands of voices lit up once more like burning flames. The song of prayer John Lennon had entrusted to the children. War would end as long as you earnestly prayed for it to disappear. But John was killed. Still, what remained weren't just his words, or his vision, or his music.

When Kagurazaka-senpai had finished singing the harmony, she did her usual thing and lifted the neck of her Les Paul above her head and began strumming her guitar solo wildly. She finished the first phrase with a single breath, then looked to Mafuyu on her right..... and winked. She then turned her head towards me and flashed me a smile.

Senpai showed me her smile.

Because Mafuyu was right there.

I played my bass to the hemiola tempo in response to Senpai's smile. I guess she knew my cheeks were all wet, but that was okay. As we approached the end of our encore, all four members of feketerigó focused their eyes on the center of the stage. Turning our heads around, Senpai's and my gaze clashed with Chiaki's eyes in-between the toms. I strummed the strings with all my might as I squeezed out all the air in my body, screaming my lungs out as I ran about the stage. When the lights were extinguished in perfect timing to the end of the song, I collapsed onto the floor as the cheers of the audience swept towards me like a whirlwind.

Chapter 16 - Airport, Black Light

In the end, I had to borrow Tomo's shoulders just to walk back to the preparation room. On the other hand, Chiaki and Senpai, despite being all wobbly, both managed to make their way back with just the assistance of the walls. That's really pathetic of me.

We flowed past the door and into the room like a pot of melted soup. The staff and the other performers congratulated us on our performance, but I couldn't quite catch what they were saying. I looked at the clock while in a hazy state of mind.

Three-thirty.

"..... I guess it's already too late."

Mumbled Chiaki. Her face was flushed and covered with sweat.

I grabbed my windbreaker and raincoat and stood up. Surprisingly, Kagurazaka-senpai already had her coat on and was preparing to leave the room.

"Oh my, you're coming along too?"

"..... Yeah."

I squeezed the MD in my pocket hard. I had recorded everything directly from the effects unit via a cable and burned it onto that disc.

However, I knew I had done everything in vain, as there was no way we could make it to the airport in just thirty minutes. But even so, there's no way I'm just going to stay put and wait.

"I'm different from young man though. I don't do silly and pointless things. But I am going."

"Senpai? Why are you accompanying that idiot—"

Chiaki ran towards Senpai only to have her forehead prodded by her.

"Because it might not be too late. Are you coming along as well, Comrade Aihara?"

It's still not too late? What should we do? I walked out of the room together with Senpai, and just as I was about to ask her what she meant by that—

"Naomi! Naomi! Hey!"

A small golden streak came rushing towards us from the entrance of the stairs. Yuri managed to stop just in time, right as he was about to crash into me. He bent his body over and panted for a while before lifting his head and saying,

"W-We might..... still have..... time! You must head to the airport now!"

"W-Why?" Where did he even go?

"Is the flight delayed? Are they waiting to see how things will turn out?"

Senpai interrupted us with her questions, and I finally understood what was going on.

It was the snow. The snow might've delayed the flight. How could I forget that that was a possibility?

"From the announcements I heard, you may be able to make it in time. But if the snowing stops....."

"Hurry!"

Senpai began sprinting before Yuri had even finished his sentence; and Chiaki overtook me in an instant, as I was running slowly because my knees were trembling from the fatigue. Then, for some unknown reason, Yuri followed us as well. The four of us ran up the stairs and into the elevator.

"W-Wait, urm....." Yuri stopped briefly to catch his breath before he continued. "The trains have halted their services, and there's currently a huge traffic jam on the highway!"

"W-What should we do then? We were finally given a ray of hope!"

Chiaki grimaced as she spat out those words and hammered her legs hard in frustration. As my burning body gradually cooled down, a dark-blue despair started to take the place of the heat. I fished my phone out to check the traffic news; and just as Yuri had said, the trains to the airport had been halted due to the snow. What about

the cabs then? No wait, can we even get one? And most of the roads are probably jammed with traffic because of the heavy snow anyway. Are there any alternative ways to get to the airport? Even if it means walking—

The elevator then stopped, and we were thrown into the spacious lobby. I finally took back control of my muscles from the chilling cold and began running, taking no notice of what Yuri was saying behind me. It was still snowing outside the entrance, but the snow was being shielded from the inside of the building by the glass walls. The trees along the sidewalk were covered in a thick layer of white, and the cars on the road were also buried in snow, not moving an inch—they looked like sushi on a conveyor belt.

I walked past the glass doors and made my way outside, only to be welcomed by the bone-chilling winds mixed with the fine snow. Immediately after, I saw something flying towards me from my left, so I caught it on reflex. Pain expanded outwards from the middle of my palms.

It was a full-face helmet.

I looked at the roaring bike parked along the side of the road, and the scruffy-looking guy in overalls standing beside it, in disbelief.

"..... What, so it's Nao huh. I would've preferred a female passenger instead."

Said Tetsurou nonchalantly, as he got on the bike and put on his helmet. Sounds of footsteps were approaching me from behind. It was Senpai and the rest of the gang.

"Get your ass over here, my silly son. And button up your coat, or it'll be dangerous when you're riding pillion. And put on the gloves too. I have no intention of driving safely, so you better be prepared."

I was stunned in place, so Chiaki gave me a hard slap on my back.

"Get going, stupid Nao!"

"I'll try to catch up with you guys. But if you make it in time, remember to tell Comrade Ebisawa this: you'll be cheating on her brazenly if she doesn't come back."

"Naomi, b-be careful."

"No worries. If we get into an accident, we'll be moving on to the other world together, hand in hand as father and son. We won't be lonely."

"Don't say something as ominous as that!" I was close to throwing my helmet at him.

"Oh—great, everything must be okay if you're feeling well enough to retort me. Now get on!"

I wasn't even sure if I could convert all my feelings into words, but they were about to turn into a jumbled mess and be forced out of my mouth. So I suppressed those emotions of mine and put on the helmet and sat in the backseat. I circled my arms around Tetsurou's surprisingly broad back, and in the next second, my body was pressed downwards. I was almost thrown off the bike, so I put more strength into my arms as they were about to tear apart.

And then, all I could see was snow streaking past me.



The roads were still pretty jammed even after we made our way past the city center. After taking a quick shortcut, Tetsurou did exactly what he had said he would do, and picked up speed without hesitation. I was a little frightened when I saw the large amount of snow accumulating on the back tire.

When we stopped at the traffic light, Tetsurou told me,

"Move your knees about and flex your fingers a little when we stop. It'd be incredibly stupid if you couldn't run once we reached the airport."

I moved them as he instructed, and they groaned in response. I couldn't help but wonder—would I even notice if my arms fell off my shoulders due to frostbite? I never thought riding pillion in the snow would be so hellish.

The houses around us decreased in number as we moved onto the highway, and the LED signboards showed that no roads were closed off. It had stopped snowing.

"It's great that the snow has stopped, but the plane may be flying anytime soon."

Mumbled Tetsurou, as we shot past the interchange. I didn't bother checking the time despite us passing several petrol kiosks and stations. It was already way past the scheduled flight time, so the only thing I could do was tightly hug Tetsurou's back and pray.

As we moved into another interchange, I could see lines of cars in front of us. As Tetsurou weaved through the cars without hesitation, the traffic jam seemed to be slowly letting up. When we passed the first toll booth, the snow that was falling from the sky was much thinner than the snow being stirred up from the roads. But surprisingly, the temperature was actually dropping. It felt like my skin was being sliced apart by a rusty blade, and the area beneath my elbows and my knees was completely numb and devoid of feeling. Tetsurou's suggestion didn't help at all, but I was in no position to complain. The pain Tetsurou was feeling should've been a hundred times greater than mine.

I suddenly thought of something as I was being exposed to the bone-chilling winds and snow.

"Hey, Tetsurou!"

I knew it was dangerous, but I shouted anyway.

"What? Don't shout into my ears! You're too loud!"

"W-Why did you ride your bike to the venue?"

To send Yuri there, of course. That much I know. But.

I saw something when I was checking the news about the traffic with my cellphone—the train from my house to the mall was running normally.

Meaning—Tetsurou had planned to send me to the airport right from the very beginning?

"Listen to me, Nao!"

I could hardly hear what Tetsurou was yelling because the wind was blowing in his face and his helmet was in the way.

"I don't think you can hear me that clearly, but I'm gonna say something really great right now. Probably the number one thing a father shouldn't say to his son! Don't become like me!"

That "great" statement was the only sentence I heard in full clarity.

I pressed my helmet against Tetsurou's back and put more strength into my arms.

"You see! In the end, I wasn't able to hold on to the woman I loved. You inherited that useless personality of yours from me, and I'm sorry for that! But there's nothing you can do about that because you can't choose your parents! But you still have time! I'll definitely make it in time!"

Thanks to my helmet, I couldn't wipe my tears away, or allow them to be blown away by the wind.

The soundproof walls that covered the road like a tube suddenly disappeared, and on the other side, was a breathtaking, pure-white building. A roaring sound then zoomed past my head, but because the sky was being obscured by the snow, I could only make out the outline of the jet.

It was the airport.

But my line of sight was blocked off by the soundproof walls again, so I could only see the control tower and the looming figure of the airport terminal. The snow had already stopped. The planes are starting to take off!

A blue sign then streaked past my head. Tetsurou had changed lanes to enter a downwards-sloping ramp that led to the entrance of the airport. I heard another roar coming from the airplanes as we passed the toll booth. Has her flight taken off already? Calm down, I have to go confirm it first.

Tetsurou stopped the bike south of the airport terminal where the cars were all stuck and dropped me off. I rolled off the backseat of the bike and removed the gloves from my hands using my mouth, then fished out my cellphone. Yuri had mailed me a simple message containing the details of Mafuyu's flight, as well as an update of the current situation. The flight was still delayed as they were still ploughing the snow off the runway. There's still time.

"Thanks, Tetsurou!"

I began to run. The passengers that were forced to remain in the airport because of the delays, along with the luggage they were carrying, were clogging up the entrance to the terminal. The warm

air from indoors made my skin itch; and it felt like I was hobbling on my knees, but I couldn't feel any pain. Announcements saying "We're very sorry for the delays" were repeatedly playing over the speakers, but, at the same time, details about how long certain flights would be delayed and when they would be taking off were also being relayed. I could feel my spine gradually freezing. Where are the international flights? Customs and the checkpoints were located on the third floor, but there was no way I could get past those to see Mafuyu if Mafuyu was already done checking in her luggage. I squeezed into the elevator packed with luggage and travelers in thick winter clothing and waited as the elevator moved up the narrow shaft. I heard the announcement just then. "Passengers of Continental Airlines flight number 6331 heading for Los Angeles, please board your flight now." I took my cellphone out with my trembling hands to double check. It was the flight Mafuyu was taking. I almost collapsed in desperation when I saw the ocean of passengers on the third floor. The crowd had squeezed into each and every check-in counter at customs, but even that was incomparable to the swarm of people at the secondary security checkpoint. I fell into a daze, and began pushing the crowd aside as I made my way forward. How the hell am I supposed to find Mafuyu in this crowd? What if she's on the airplane already?

I squeezed past the crowd and made my way to the front of the counters. Despite the fact that the travelers and the staff around me were looking at me—a kid with only a raincoat on his body and no luggage—with suspicion, I was completely unaware of their gazes.

My eyes were fixed on the long maroon-coloured hair that had just walked past the security gate. She was about to make her way towards the boarding gates.

"—Mafuyu!"

A hoarse, dry sound echoed throughout the hall.

Mafuyu turned around, and her sapphire eyes opened wide in surprise. For a brief moment, I could see all sorts of emotions flashing past the surface of that blue ocean.

"Mafuyu—!"

I stretched my body above the gate and yelled. I then finally

noticed Ebichiri, who was standing next to the luggage-pulling Mafuyu. Upon seeing my face, Ebichiri's angry expression was bared for all to see.

He grabbed the hands of his dumbfounded daughter and tried to guide her towards the boarding gates, but Mafuyu's legs wouldn't move. Her mouth remained opened as she tried to speak.

It was like we were tying each other down with our eyes. Ebichiri's expression changed when an announcement was made, and he tried to forcibly pull Mafuyu away.

"Naomi?"

Said Mafuyu with a stiff voice.

"W-Why..... are you here?"

Can't I be here? My vision was close to blacking out.

"You idiot, why..... couldn't you have come e-earlier....."

Through the corners of my eyes, I could see a few employees in uniform running towards me; and at the same time, Ebichiri was pulling Mafuyu away from the barrier by the arm. She's leaving. It took me so much effort to finally see her, and I finally made it in time; but Mafuyu's about to leave, and there's nothing I can do but watch.

"Mafuyu!"

I pulled the MD out of my pocket and began my move. A huge commotion arose among the crowd. Getting restrained by the airport staff; the snow that was left on my arm; the distance between Mafuyu and me—

In an attempt to slice all that apart, I threw it out.

A black light flew past the security gate and the barrier that was separating us, and landed straight in Mafuyu's chest.

I could hear the sound of the world splitting in two.

Mafuyu's hands were reaching out in my direction. She had lost her right hand, gotten it back for a brief moment, but only to lose it once more. The sound of her catching that ray of light with that irreplaceable hand of hers.....

The staff at the security gates ran towards Mafuyu while the security guards surrounded me and grabbed me by my wildly thrashing hands. I wanted to push the crowd aside so I could see Mafuyu, or at the very least, I wanted to say something to her. But the security guards were roaring furiously into my ears. I twisted my body, flung my shoulders about, and rammed myself into the wall of people to break myself free.

Ebichiri and the rest of the airport staff protected Mafuyu by blocking off my vision of her. The beige coat was about to hide the long maroon hair away.

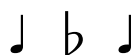
"I'll be waiting for you!"

I squeezed out my voice.

"I'll find you if you don't come back! I'll definitely find you!"

The delirious me was pinned to the ground by several pairs of arms, and my world suddenly became washed over with white linoleum. I was then hit hard on the back of my neck by the security guards, who were shouting boorishly.

At long last came the announcement of the flight taking off. The countless numbers of footsteps—footsteps that were both gradually approaching and gradually leaving—dealt the final blow to my consciousness.



I was brought to a room and forced to sit down on a foldable chair. There, I listened to the rumbling roars. "Which one of these pairs of wings is carrying Mafuyu?"—I thought to myself.

In the end, I only managed to convey my music to her. No, I might've even failed in that regard. It might've been taken away by the airport security. Or perhaps Ebichiri had confiscated it. I couldn't remember any of my answers to the harsh questioning of the airport staff.

Only Mafuyu.

The only thing that was imprinted in my memory, and the thing that I had seen last, was the back of Mafuyu.

Chapter 17 - Graduation Ceremony

When I opened the door leading to the roof, the shy noon rays of March blinded me slightly.

Normally at this time, you'd hear things like the trumpets or trombones of the orchestra, girls chattering as they opened their bentos in the courtyard, or guys chasing after the ball in the basketball court. Normally, it should be pretty lively. But today, the school was shrouded in a solemn silence, and the only things I could hear were the school song and the piano accompaniment coming from the sports hall.

I lay down on the rough concrete floor and looked down, and immediately saw a uniformed figure sitting on the fence. Her two braids were swaying about in the spring breeze, and a few strands of hair were resting on the black guitar on her thighs. Her eyes were closed—is she listening to the school song?

Wait, her eyes are closed?

I rushed forward in a hurry.

"That's dangerous, Senpai! And you're still holding the guitar—"

Kagurazaka-senpai opened her eyes a little and looked in my direction and smiled.

"In the past three years, I've spent way more time sitting here with my Les Paul than I did sitting on the chair in my classroom. So you don't have to worry."

No, even if you say that, it's really easy to fall off when your eyes are closed. What the hell are you thinking?

Senpai probably found the uneasy expression on my face really amusing, so she jumped off the fence and patted me on the shoulder.

"I get it, we need our bodies for our performance. I won't do anything rash. I mean, tomorrow they're holding a graduation

ceremony just for me. I want do the impossible and make it as grand as possible."

"Urm, why don't you take part in the actual graduation ceremony instead?"

I pointed in the direction of the sports hall.

"You do know it's a school tradition to have the third year student with the best overall grades in the mock exams to be the representative for the students, right?"

"Oh, is that so?" I had no idea.

"But the teachers are unwilling to let a student who has barely passed the attendance requirements be the representative, and I have no intention of reading a script that has been checked over by the teachers anyway. We share the same interests, so I skipped the ceremony and came to the roof instead. It's the world of the adults. And right now, the person acting as my replacement is probably reading something really boring, along the lines of 'a future full of hope' and so on."

Chiaki and I had been worried about whether or not Senpai could successfully graduate, but that woman had easily achieved the required grades for graduation, and had even already enrolled herself in a national university. It wasn't like I didn't know how smart she was, but I had never expected her grades to be that stellar.

"Senpai would definitely say something explosive if you gave the graduation speech."

"If you want, I can make one during tomorrow's live performance."

Smiled Senpai, as she gently caressed her Les Paul. We were holding a graduation concert at Bright the next day, with Senpai as the star.

"Oh right. How did you know I was here, young man?"

"Because we went to the graduation ceremony looking for you. I waited outside while Chiaki snuck a peek inside the sports hall. She told me you weren't there."

Because of our school's large student population, the only non-graduating students that could attend the ceremony were a small

handful of students involved in student council work.

"Ah, there you are! I finally found you!"

Shocked by the sudden shout, I turned my head around and saw Chiaki next to the door to the roof, running in our direction.

"Nao got the better of me again. This sucks."

Chiaki stared fiercely at me as she hugged Kagurazaka-senpai's arm.

"Did you two split up to search for me?"

"I thought Senpai was in the practice room. Speaking of which, why are you skipping the graduation ceremony anyway?"

"We no longer live in a world where we have to graduate under the supervision of others. Did you want me to take part in the ceremony?"

"But I was planning to catch you as you were walking out of the sports hall to take your second button."

That's for the guy's uniform, yeah? But Senpai just let out a giggle and leaned against the fence as she removed her Les Paul from her shoulder.

"It just so happens that there's four buttons on my blazer. This—or what you'd refer to as the second button—is for Comrade Aihara."

Senpai tore her bottom-left button off and passed it on to Chiaki. A blissful expression appeared on Chiaki's face.

"And this is for young man."

She gave me the decorative button on the bottom right.

"This one's for me."

She kept the top-left button for herself and put it in her pocket.

Then, lastly, she tore off the final button and gave it a kiss, and turned to face me.

"..... Where is she now? Europe?"

I was taken by surprise, but I knew immediately who Senpai was talking about.

"She should be on a tour in Russia. At least, that's what I read in

the magazines."

"Oh, Russia huh?"

Senpai began walking towards the fence on the opposite side of the roof, and Chiaki and I followed her, as if we were being attracted by some sort of unknown energy. Beneath our eyes, the scenery of the school was laid bare for us to see. The white lines framing the school grounds were actually the sakura blossoms that had been planted in the school, but they were only blossoming at about thirty percent.

Kagurazaka-senpai swung her tightly clenched fist with all her might, and threw that last button into the air. Chiaki and I didn't follow the trajectory of the button's flight, and instead, just stared at the broad, blue sky.

It had probably flown to the other side of the ocean.

"There's no longer any need for this."

Senpai took off the blazer that was devoid of buttons and threw that dark blue feather over the fence. It rode on the winds and soared down, towards the colour of the sakura far away from us.

"Why is this so?"—I thought to myself.

It wasn't an eternal farewell—we would be seeing each other the next day on the same stage—but my tears wouldn't stop.



Mafuyu hadn't returned even after a year had passed.

The first time I was reunited with her, was through the cover story of a music magazine—sometime around summer last year, I think. The story covered Mafuyu's successful rehabilitation, as well as her desire to make a comeback onto the music scene.

Her first comeback album was a three-CD album—something that was fairly uncommon—and on it, was the full collection of Beethoven's piano concertos. Ebichiri was the conductor, and the Boston Orchestra, the accompaniment. The father and daughter pair had become quite the topic of discussion, and the album was a huge success. But it seemed like the original plan to have Mafuyu perform

the violin sonata together with Yuri had been canned, and, as a result, Kagurazaka-senpai had become incredibly envious of the sample tape I had in my possession, and had even begged me to let her to copy it. But I always ended up rejecting her request, because I didn't want anyone else to hear it.

Perhaps because it was my treasure.

Just like she had told us, Mafuyu had also begun holding concerts as well. It had started off with her performing in major cities in America with Ebichiri, but soon grew to her performing solo all over Europe. She was appearing more frequently on television as well. But it wasn't just that, it seemed like even non-music-related magazines were also hot on her heels. I couldn't imagine her being the same girl we used to perform together on stage and study together with. The same girl that was easily angered, that had pissed others off, that had made people cry, and that had even revealed her crying face to others.

But I knew from her piano—be it from the CDs or the live telecast on channel four—that that Mafuyu still existed. In a country on the other side of the ocean and out of my reach, located somewhere in a glamorous but icy world of light.

Yuri, on the other hand, was emailing me or calling me all the time, and there were even occasions when he would send me a letter while he was on tour.

"I saw Mafuyu when Ebichiri invited me to Boston. Are you jealous?"

Or would make an international call just so he could tell me something like that.

"..... Is she doing okay?"

"I am asking if you are jealous."

Why are you angry? Though I am indeed jealous.

"That is just the way Naomi is, and that is why Mafuyu refuses to speak whenever I try to bring Naomi up in our conversations."

"Urm..... I see....."

I heaved a sigh. It was quite a huge blow to hear that from

someone who saw her frequently.

"Why don't you go see her?"

"No, well, you see..... she's not in Japan."

I knew very well that that was nothing more than an excuse, and Yuri probably knew as well. If I had really wanted to see her, all I had to do was have Tetsurou contact Ebichiri, or ask Yuri for his assistance. Regardless of whether she was in America, France, or Germany, all I needed was a flight. But I became scared whenever I thought that she might be unwilling to see me.

Mafuyu might still be mad at me. Because I did something really horrible to her.

"Mafuyu might hate me right now. She probably does not want to speak to me."

My thoughts were overshadowed by Yuri's tearful voice.

"..... Nah, I don't think that's the case."

"Maybe she does not want to see me anymore. Naomi will have to take responsibility if that is the case, alright?"

What responsibility?

Yuri will be coming to Japan in May, so how about we gather at the studio or the live house when you're here, since Senpai misses you a lot? After discussing those plans, we ended the call.

After disconnecting the call, I suppressed the slightly painful warmth that was flowing out from the inside of my eyes.

She's probably too busy with her recordings and concerts anyway—I consoled myself. That was the habit I had developed last winter, when she had been in America for a full year. I always told myself that every time I saw her on the television or the magazines, or when someone mentioned her all of a sudden.

But when the pain flowed away from the inside of my head, all that was left inside were Mafuyu's smiles; her tearful face; her immature way of speaking; her angry voice; her wet whispers.



Feketerigó had continued its activities even in Mafuyu's absence. The biggest change however, was that Senpai had begun accepting guest performers into the band.

"Because we're learning how to fly with our broken wings."

And so, for the graduation concert, the cramped stage of Bright—that could accommodate a maximum of eight people—was almost entirely filled with guest guitarists. I had no idea what we were playing halfway into the performance, but Chiaki was laughing like crazy throughout the whole thing, and had made quite a few mistakes.

But the main event was the celebration that happened after the performance. We were on the second floor of the Chinese restaurant we often patronized, and aside from the members of the band, there was also Hiroshi, Furukawa and the rest of the members of Melancholy Chameleon, Tomo and his DJ buddies, the staff of Bright, and the manager of the shop that Senpai worked at..... All sorts of people were there, drinking crazily.

"Kyouko, we'll be celebrating your graduation with thirty shots. Prepare yourself and your glass!"

Said Hiroshi, as he walked right up to Senpai with a bottle of wine in his hand and the rest of the guys queued up behind him. Hey, don't agree to that toast! But I didn't even get an opportunity to stop her. Pour, drink, pour, drink—that continued on as the queue shortened. It's like she's engaging in a drinking duel with the guys or something.

"There's still a long way to go."

But even after she had drunk all the shots that were given to her, Senpai was still sober. She placed her glass on the table; and in response to her heroic performance, the guys actually wanted to go for a second round, but that was stopped in time.

"Still, why do you wanna study at a university, Kyouko? Didn't I say I would recommend you to a record company? You should get your career on track asap."

The red-faced Hiroshi latched himself onto her.

"The people connected to Hiroshi are probably around the same level as you, so please allow me to decline your offer. I do value my

future, you know?"

"Hey, Taisei, you hear that? She just said something really rude."

"But it's the truth." Furukawa was a little taken aback when the conversation was thrown at him all of a sudden. "I think it's better for her to go indie."

Still, I had never expected Senpai to continue her studies. And I wanted to know why.

"Hmm? Why? Why else other than for knowledge?"

Senpai answered plainly as she poured a cup of shōchū.

"I'm a revolutionary. And I'd lose my right to be one if I lacked the knowledge."

"I never expected Senpai to have thought about things so seriously." Chiaki, who was sitting close to Senpai, was genuinely surprised. "I thought Senpai's main reason was to chase after girls."

"That's also one of the reasons. It seems like I've recently developed a taste for girls that are older than me. And there'll probably be a lot of rich ladies there, so I'm really looking forward to it."

"Senpai's an idiot!"

Chiaki pulled Senpai's ear. Sheesh, this girl never changes.

"But don't you worry, young man."

She leaned herself on my arm.

"I chose a women's university so that you wouldn't feel uneasy."

I almost spat out the oolong tea in my mouth.

"—W-W-What do you mean by that?"

"Well, if she hasn't returned even though I've graduated..... That means I win by default, and that you can finally lay your hands on me, yeah?"

No no no no.



When I finally escaped from that place, I had just enough time to

make it to the final train. Chiaki had come with me as well, as we still had our graduation ceremony the next day. The heat from the drinking party had totally exhausted me, so I used my bass as a makeshift crutch and sat down on one of the chairs at the train station. I slumped my body weakly over my knees. "Are you okay? Do you need some water?" asked Chiaki worryingly. I don't think anyone looking at that scene could've figured out which one of us was the drunk one.

The train reached the station that was closest to our homes around midnight; and by then, the aftereffects of the drinking party had already subsided, and my face was no longer burning anymore. When I stepped off of the train, I gripped the sleeves of my coat tightly in response to the cold. Chiaki was the last passenger to step off the train, and after she did so, the empty train rumbled away on the dark railway.

The two of us were walking side by side, as we shared the same path for the majority of the route home.

"Well, to be honest"—Chiaki suddenly spoke as we were crossing the zebra crossing—"I was actually hoping Senpai would have to repeat another year."

That's brutally honest of you. But why are you talking about this all of a sudden?

"Her university's in Tokyo, right? It'll be quite difficult for us to meet up with her in the future, and I'm not even sure if we'll continue on with the band."

"Why don't you aim for Senpai's university?"

Didn't you do that for high school anyway?

"There's no way I could get into that university with a brain like mine!" She suddenly hit me. I originally thought it was just a joke, but I noticed a shimmer in the corners of her eyes when she was staring at me. I felt a brief pain in my heart.

"It's getting lonelier and lonelier."

Don't you worry. There's no way human beings would disappear as easily as that.

Even if you're separated, you won't feel lonely as long as you know

you will see each other again.

Even if you can't meet, you won't feel depressed as long as you don't forget each other.

A few pointless consolatory statements popped up in my mind, but I had no intention of saying any of them to Chiaki. Because they were all lies. I knew that very well.

Don't worry, I won't disappear.

That would've been the worst thing I could've said. I had no right to say that to Chiaki.

We walked silently past several streetlights, then turned past the family restaurant that was still open in the middle of the night; and as we did so, the shadows of the housing complex drifted to our left. After walking down the slope, the transmission towers came into sight, indicating we were about to reach Chiaki's house.

"..... We'll still be holding morning practice tomorrow even though it's the day of our graduation ceremony, right?"

In the end, that was the only thing I could think of saying.

Chiaki stopped in her tracks and looked at me irritably.

"Hey, we're the rhythm section. As long as we're perfect with our practices, it'll be fine even if someone decides to join us all of a sudden."

Even if someone returned back to the band all of a sudden.

No problems would exist as long as the rhythm section was there to maintain the pace.

We could get feketerigó to soar at any given instant.

Chiaki then began hitting my arm all of a sudden, punching me quite a few times in silence. Hey, what are you doing? That hurts. I moved my arm away, and just as I was about to look at her, her palm pushed my face in the opposite direction.

"..... What?"

"Nothing."

"No, but....."

"I said nothing, so it's nothing! Sheesh, why is Nao always so

irritatingly sensitive..... at a stupid..... time like this?"

This time around, it was my shoulders that suffered a few chops. I was about to say something to Chiaki, but she suddenly delivered a drop sweep and ran away.

"See ya, stupid Nao! Till tomorrow!"

Her tea-coloured hair swayed about beneath the streetlights, then disappeared past the corner. I was stunned in place for a brief moment, but soon picked my bass up and resumed my journey.

I stopped in the middle of the overhead bridge. Burning emotions began to slowly rise up inside me as I directed my gaze down the broad roads and into a place past the intersection point of the street lights. For some reason, everything that I was looking at seemed so cute. The white lines on the road created by the speeding cars; the gradually receding tail lights of the cabs and trucks; the night breeze infused with the faint scent of flowers; and perhaps even Senpai's singing voice that remained in my ears.

Everything would flow past me and disappear without a trace someday.



Tetsurou wasn't around when I returned home, but several files and CDs were scattered about messily on the table. Looks like he went out when he was in the middle of his work. He's probably grabbing a coffee at the family restaurant or something. This might sound unbelievable, but Tetsurou couldn't even make himself a cup of instant coffee if I wasn't around.

I leaned my bass against the wall and began organizing the DVDs and magazines strewn on the floor. I was only gone for the day, and this is what happens. As I was stacking the materials neatly on the desk, I noticed it.

It was located at the top of the pile of CDs. The cover was taken from her right. A very simple picture of her looking down at the keyboard with lowered eyes. Whenever she was performing, she would always clip her maroon hair up like that and reveal that unbearably slender and pale nape of hers.

It was the latest album from Ebisawa Mafuyu. "She has matured quite a bit"—I thought. Is she still the same Mafuyu I knew? I lifted the CD up slowly.

After she had made her comeback, Mafuyu had released three albums at an incredible pace in quick succession. I didn't buy the albums though, because just looking at the covers and listening to her performances would've been painful. But thanks to the nature of Tetsurou's job, even if I didn't purchase the CDs, we would still receive them from the company as gifts.

It was the fourth album following her comeback. Finally, it's Bach. The complete collection of the French Suites. I wanted to listen to it so badly, despite knowing that I would definitely cry.

I sat on the sofa and opened the case. But something fell out of the little booklet just as I was about to take out the explanatory notes. Picking it up, I realized it was a flyer detailing the schedule of Ebisawa Mafuyu's concerts.

The flyer was filled with the names of the venues she would be performing at and the words [SOLD OUT], all the way from January to June. She wasn't scheduled to play in Japan. I heaved a sigh and was about to place the flyer back into the case.

But then, I noticed something.

There was a particularly strange line in the flyer. The performance on the fourth of April.

It was the only performance that wasn't stamped with the words [SOLD OUT]. Instead, it was declared [PRIVATE]. What's the meaning of this? The performance's location was Paris; and the venue's name was in French, so I couldn't understand it. [PRIVATE]?

The location was pretty weird as well, as there were no other performances scheduled in France after that. Just Paris.

Fourth of April.

I gripped the flyer tightly and checked the name of the venue again. I then dashed to the study on the second floor and translated it with a French-Japanese dictionary. It meant "Thieves' Market." She'll be performing in a thieves' market in Paris?

Just then, all of my memories fell like a burst of sparks and

became strung up together.

I pulled out the movable shelf that the science fiction novels had been randomly placed in. Cordwainer Smith was famous for only a single title of his. I quickly skimmed through the novel. Found it.

I closed the book and held my breath as I looked up at the ceiling filled with spider webs.

Is this Mafuyu's message for me? Really? Did she request her company to put it in? But what if I had missed it?

Why must she do something like this? Wouldn't it be easier to just say it directly—

The novel slipped out of my hands.

Aren't I doing the same thing? Dishonest with my feelings, and dragging things out day by day. Despite the fact that I wanted to see her. Even though I was dying to see her. We were located in different parts of the world, but all I did was stand in front of the ocean that separated us both.

Even though I had said I would find her.

I promised I was going to find her regardless of where she was, didn't I?

I picked the book up to slip the flyer in-between the pages where the answer had been revealed, then closed it.

The scenery that appeared in my mind consisted of the sound of the waves, the whisper of the sea birds, and the scent of the wet soil. And it all overlapped with the calls of a certain someone. Let's go. I'll know once I'm there.

It's a magical place, so it can probably hear my heartfelt desire.

Chapter 18 - The Department Store at the Ends of the World

As I climbed up the slope located in-between the fields, the scent of grass was becoming stronger and stronger. The rays of the sun were seeping into the ground, and I could hear the sound of the waves coming from a place far behind me.

The path became slightly flatter as I walked into the forest; and the comfortable shadows of the treetops were gently filtering out the sun for me. "Thank god it's sunny"—I thought to myself. It was raining the last time I came here, and pitch black to boot. I had come close to tripping over the tree roots many times back then.

The trucks had rolled out a path in the forest, and the plants at the base of the trees were blooming. Two seasonal cycles had passed since I had last gone there.

Unease slowly crept into me. Is it still there? Does the magical valley still accept visits from human beings?

I stopped in my tracks and leaned against a tree, then took out a torn and tattered novel from the back pocket of my jeans. It sported the signature blue spine of the Hayakawa SF books, and on the cover, there was a sheep standing in the middle of the wilderness amid a sandstorm.

<Norstrilia>.

It was a story about a youth that, despite having obtained all the wealth in the universe, still didn't know what he truly desired. So he went to Earth to seek out an answer. Upon arriving there, he met a beautiful cat and traveled to a fake underground city; and in that city, past the corner of the fake Paris thieves' market, stood the store of the Catmaster. It was an extremely old store, but it had the ability to identify the true desires of its visitors. And the name of the shop was..... <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

I rechecked the flyer that was clipped in the book. Everything fits. If this is a message that Mafuyu left for me, and if that magic still

exists.....

I stuffed the book back into my pocket and resumed walking. The soil felt hard beneath my feet. The air was moist, and the roars of the ocean, combined with the rustling of the branches, sounded like the drizzling of rain outside a window. A bird spread its wings amongst the branches and flew away, its cries streaking past my head. I was praying with every step I took.

The trees were starting to become sparse, and a murky mist was beginning to mix in with the backdrop of the forest. I picked up my pace, kicking up the accumulated leaves on the ground as I began to run. I couldn't hear any music. When I left the forest, my eyes and face were illuminated by the rays of the sun. Lying on the plateau in the middle of the broad valley, was a mountain made up of an unbelievable amount of trash. Derelict cars without wheels and doors; rusty bicycles; fridges that were covered with decomposing leaves; and wardrobes whose colours had changed—everything was piled up in a dangerous equilibrium that had accumulated gradually and that could slow down time.

The roars of the ocean; the chirps of the birds; the cries of the insects—I couldn't hear any of them. Not even the howls of the wind. I stood at the entrance of the valley. The world ends here. I can't proceed any further.

I approached the mountain slowly, careful not to make any sounds. To scale the mountain of junk, I climbed onto the hood of a car, grabbed some buried prefab roofing and stepped on a heavily twisted road sign. The smell of rust, the smell of stale water and the smell of the accumulated years penetrated my nose.

I made it to what looked like the crater of a volcano. A steep slope extended downwards from my feet to the depression at the center of the mountain. I knelt down on a twisted cabinet and scanned the lowland; but a pang of dizziness suddenly hit me, and I almost collapsed, just like that.

There was no one around. The clear sunlight was drying up what remained of my hopes and dreams. I'm the only one here. Also—

The piano wasn't there.

The piano that tightly bound Mafuyu and me together was nowhere

to be seen.

In spite of that though, I placed my weak and trembling legs on the metal rack below and began my slow descent. When I reached the edge of the lowland, I saw a black shimmer in-between an old vending machine and a public phone. I scrambled my way towards that gleam, and in the process, tripped a few times and nearly fell.

The piano was buried heavily under a bunch of large trash, and I could only catch a glimpse of a part of its keyboard. It was like looking at the tip of an iceberg. Pushing away the wooden shelf to get a better view inside, I saw that the strings of the piano had almost completely snapped, and that its legs were broken as well.

Two seasonal cycles had already passed, so it wasn't surprising that the abandoned object was destroyed to the point that it was no longer salvageable.

I squat down on the pitted galvanized plate and took out my cellphone to check what time it was. It was way past two, the time of the performance that was written on the flyer.

Why am I so stupid? That wasn't a message for me. It might just be that there's really a concert hall called "Thieves' Market" in Paris. I had lost something that I couldn't bear to lose, and lacked the courage to get it back. What a pathetic person I am, traveling on the trains for hours to reach the ends of the world, only to confirm that she won't be returning to me. It was probably just a coincidence. The sunlight was gently shining on the back of my ears, but my tears couldn't flow out of my eyes as the world grinded to a halt.

I gently caressed the edge of the piano, which looked like it was melting into the ground. Having absorbed the rays of the sun, the piano felt warm. That piano had belonged to Mafuyu's mother, and was the same piano that had helped me find the fragments of myself, as well as my heartfelt desire.

But it was broken now, unable to play any music ever again. The only things left were the remnants of the distant past reverberating fuzzily in my ears.

I want to see Mafuyu so badly. My throat was being seared by my rising emotions.

Then shouldn't I just go and see her?

Let's go.

Let's fly to the country located on the other side of the ocean.

And this time, I must properly say it to her.

I stood up and shook away the sound of the piano in my memories that was echoing in my illusion. As I turned away—

I saw a pure white silhouette on the peak of the mountain of trash.

Slowly, the magic that was shrouding the valley disappeared. The pure white dress and the maroon hair were dancing on a gust of wind that was passing through the mountains.

I couldn't make a sound. It wasn't an illusion. The magic had already disappeared, but Mafuyu was right there in front of me—in reality, standing in a place I could reach with my outstretched hand.

Mafuyu's here.

I wanted to call out her name, but all I could utter was a hoarse sound. I could see her sapphire eyes widening. I leapt over a muddy scooter and dashed towards her, trampling over cardboard beer boxes and plastic bottles along the way. When I reached the slope of the mountain, I climbed up with all my might, disregarding the possible danger of a landslide.

"—Mafuyu!"

My voice finally came out. It's Mafuyu. It is indeed her! She came. We can finally meet. We can finally see each other!

"Nao.....mi."

The dumbfounded Mafuyu let out a faint murmur, then snapped back to reality and knelt down. She stretched her sandaled feet out timidly, then jumped onto a children's desk a short distance below her and turned towards me. She was planning to make her way down.

"No, w-wait, it's dangerous—"

While I was hesitating over my words, the drawer that Mafuyu was holding onto suddenly tilted erratically.

"—Kya!"

The surface of the trash slope began to crumble, and the fridge that I was standing on wobbled, causing me to fall forward. With my legs securely positioned and my arms stretched out as much as possible, I managed to catch the white feather that was fluttering down, and pulled it towards me.

My back crashed into what was probably the boot of an SUV, and coupled with the weight of Mafuyu's body, that collision felt like it had squeezed all of the air in my body out through my nose and ears. The back of my body and the back of my head were assaulted with pain, and my neck muscles twitched as the bone-rumbling sounds of the caving junk continued. That was dangerous.....

"—S-Sorry!"

Mafuyu sat up on my stomach amid the settling dust.

"U-Urm, I was shocked, so....."

"Nah, it's okay." Though I definitely would've died if anything sharp had been behind me. I couldn't move—not because of the pain, but rather, because of the sweet and bitter emotions that were mixed up inside me. I continued staring at Mafuyu as I lay there. Her face, framed by her hair, was colored amber under the rays of the spring sun. She might've looked mature on the cover of her CDs, but that totally wasn't the case here. Those slightly teary sapphire-blue eyes belonged to the girl that I knew very well—the girl that was easily angered, and that loved to cry.

I thought I would never get to see her again. The words jammed in my throat, as well as the boiling emotions surging inside me, were causing my lips to tremble.

"..... I never expected you..... to be here."

That was the only thing I could say. Mafuyu's face gradually turned red.

"W-Why?" She placed her fists in my chest and moved her face close to mine. "The fact that you are here means you saw it, right? My performance schedule. That is why....."

"Eh? Ah, m-mmm."

All I had to do was believe.

"But it said two o'clock on the flyer. And there wasn't anyone around when I came here, so....."

Mafuyu was blushing right down to her ears.

"T-T-Tha..... That is..... two o'clock in France's time zone."

Mafuyu desperately tried to come up with an excuse. France's time zone..... So that's six in the morning?

"Ah, urm—"

"..... Were you lost again?"

"I was not lost!"

She hammered my chest. Oh well, whatever. She's only twenty to thirty minutes late.

While I was late a full two years. But Mafuyu still came.

"I-I too....." stammered Mafuyu, with her eyes in tears, "wanted to call you or e-mail you so many times. But, I-I was not sure if you..... so....."

I felt an insurmountable pain in my chest where Mafuyu was pressing her hands.

"So if you had not noticed it, I was planning..... to forget you. It is difficult for me to take a break, and I was not sure when I could come back to Japan, so I begged the publicity department to tweak the flyer a little. B-But what if you did not see it? What if you did not notice it? What would I do? I did think that..... t-there was no need to do something like that, that all I had to do was give you a call. But, because..... you never tried to contact me..... I was scared, I was so scared, but even then, if it was here, if it was this place....."

Mafuyu's voice was about to be swallowed up by her tears, so I rested my hand gently on hers.

"..... Ah, s-sorry."

Mafuyu stood up. Her warmth left me; and I slowly sat up. Is it because she doesn't want me to see her crying? Mafuyu immediately turned her face away when she noticed my gaze, and wiped the tears away from her eyes. Then, she jumped off the boot of the SUV.

"..... Mama's piano....."

I slowly stood up as she mumbled to herself.

Mafuyu was walking unsteadily on the uneven ground, towards the center of the junkyard. The vision of her back seemed unreal—it felt like she would disappear in an instant under the sunlight if I turned my eyes away for even the slightest moment.

Mafuyu knelt before the buried piano. She didn't move an inch, even after I had caught up to her and stopped right behind her. She was trembling.

"..... It will..... no longer play....."

A voice of helplessness.

Music no longer existed there. The magic that had bound us together had disappeared. Reality had returned to the ends of the world, and the place would welcome yet another seasonal cycle. But as time began to tick, Mafuyu and I were the only ones in that place.

So I called out Mafuyu's name.

The kneeling Mafuyu looked up at me and my outstretched hand.

Her slender fingers entwined themselves with mine, and I pulled Mafuyu up. She was standing right in front of me, her sapphire eyes right next to mine.

"..... It was here..... that Mafuyu helped me find my bass."

I was slowly confirming each and every word I spoke.

"You played the song <Blackbird> at dawn when the rain stopped. Do you still remember?"

Mafuyu looked straight into my eyes and nodded.

"That was the exact moment..... I fell in love with you."

I conveyed my words slowly to Mafuyu, similar to how the rays of the sun transmitted their heat to the Earth after traveling a hundred and fifty million kilometers in a vacuum. Her blue eyes looked as though they were melting into the ocean, and her pink lips trembled several times as she tried to say something.

"M-Me..... too....."

Mafuyu's face turned red again as she said that. But then again,

my face was probably just as red as hers.

"I was in love with you..... way before that."

"When exactly?" My voice was trembling. What an idiotic question.

"I do not know."

Mafuyu closed her eyes and screamed into my chest.

"Before I realized it, I was already in love with you. A person like you!"

"..... Urm, well, sorry for that."

"Why are you apologizing?"

Mafuyu hammered my chest a few times, and even headbutted me once. It was actually quite painful, so I lifted my hands to stop her—

But before I knew it, I was already hugging Mafuyu's head and back tightly.

Her soft hair slipped in-between my fingers, and Mafuyu pressed her cheek against the shirt on my chest. She could probably hear my heart beating wildly. I knew I was doing something incredible, but I wasn't about to let go.

In the end—Mafuyu circled her arms around my back as well.



"Dummy."

The tearful Mafuyu whispered in my chest.

"I was waiting for you all this time."

"Mmm."

I didn't say the word "sorry." Because there was nothing else I needed to say to Mafuyu. She was right there in my arms. I could feel Mafuyu's warmth.

It would be great if we could be together forever from now on.



We left the valley, hand in hand; and when we stepped into the forest, it felt like the place behind us had once again become shrouded in time-stopping magic. But neither of us turned our heads around.

The air in the forest was moist, as though it had been doused by a heavy downpour. It's probably a result of Mafuyu's tears. I could hear the chirps of the birds. They were chatting somewhere in the foliage. Music had returned to our sides once more.

Mafuyu and I said nothing at all as we crossed the forest, making our way back to the small pathway in-between the fields. The feeling emanating from our tightly entwined hands was making me so incredibly happy, I was afraid I would say something stupid if I tried to speak. Most of my attention was focused on stealing glances at Mafuyu's profile. Whenever our eyes met, Mafuyu would lower her head in embarrassment. She was probably thinking the same things as me.

The sounds of an orchestra ensemble rang out all of a sudden when we were walking down the slope. Mafuyu let out a shriek and pressed her hands on the small bag that was hanging off her waist. It was an incoming call—the ringtone was Beethoven's [**<Piano Concerto no. 2>**](#) in B ♭ major.

"..... A call? You're not picking it up?"

Mafuyu shook her head.

"It is from Papa, so it is okay."

Really? The ringtone continued playing until it was cut off at the main theme.

"He probably wants me to head back to Tokyo as soon as possible."

"Your schedule's really packed, isn't it?"

"It is okay. I do not want to attend those boring parties anyway."

Mafuyu grabbed my hands again.

"..... Today, the only thing I want is..... to be together with Naomi."

My heart was beating wildly. I had an urge to run down the slope while pulling Mafuyu along with me. I wasn't very successful at calming my heart down.

"Urm, so, you're on a break now? Till when?"

"I will be going to Chicago next week."

Said Mafuyu softly, with her head lowered. But she suddenly lifted her head to look at me.

"B-But, urm, well, I will be back again for a week early this May. And I will be in Japan during the summer for recordings. So we can see each other then."

I nodded my head repeatedly and returned Mafuyu's grip with mine.

"Speaking of early May, we're planning to participate in a live concert that'll span three consecutive days. Will you come and listen?"

"A live performance?" Mafuyu's eyes were filled with unease when she asked, "..... feketerigó's?"

"Yeah."

As she lifted my hand and held it in front of her chest, Mafuyu mumbled,

"..... Chiaki and Kyouko..... are they angry at me?"

"Chiaki's a little angry."

Mafuyu lifted her eyes diagonally to look at me. I laughed and swung her arms about.

"Don't worry, the two girls miss you very much. The band has been

active the whole time, and we even invited some guest performers recently. Do you still remember who Furukawa is? That guitarist with the really fierce look. Remember how he used to say he wouldn't perform with a band as lousy as ours? Well, he's finally okay with performing with us."

So there was no need to worry. Even if we were separated, even if things had changed, even if we had lost something—

There was nothing we couldn't get back.

"T-Then."

But Mafuyu cut herself off and didn't say any more. We had reached the end of the slope and were back on the concrete streets. Shortly after we walked into the residential area, Mafuyu finally spoke again.

"U-Urm, I have bought a new guitar."

I looked at Mafuyu in surprise.

"I got to know a person from Fender in California, so I asked him to custom-make one for me."

A custom-made guitar huh, now that's really extravagant. No wait, hold on, a guitar? Did she just say a guitar?

"S-So that means—"

"I brought it to our villa. Want to see it?"

"Definitely! N-No wait, I do want to see it, but, urm....."

"It sounds a little stiff. I still prefer the sound of Yuri's guitar, so I hope Naomi can help me with that."

I nodded my head vigorously.

"Also."

Mafuyu lifted both our hands and stared at our fingers.

"I am not too sure if my technique has worsened..... so I hope Chiaki and Kyouko can listen to me play. Is that okay?"

"Of course!" I grabbed Mafuyu's hand with both of my own. "Urm, well, wanna show up at the studio during our practice? No? Ah, but, urm, for you to show up on stage in May all of a sudden, that's just..... In any case, I'll give Senpai a call—"

"No!" Mafuyu grabbed me my wrist just as I was about to take out my cellphone. Our eyes met; and she turned her blushing face away slightly.

"Urm, it is not that you can't, but..... let us leave that for another time..... Today, all I want....."

Is to be with you..... —I couldn't hear the words that came after that.



The sun was about to set when we reached the station. We walked past the bus rotary, down the underground flight of stairs and through the ticketing gates.

As we were walking up to the platform, we saw a small grey dot in the middle of the faraway green mountains. We stopped on the last step of the stairs and gazed silently at the ends of the world, the department store where time stopped.

Then, all of a sudden, the grey dot burst apart, and turned into countless shards that became scattered around the greenish slopes. The shards then made their way towards the blue sky.

It was a flock of birds.

Their formation slowly changed as they sought out the currents that would help them soar into the air. Despite the considerable distance between us and them, it felt like I could hear their cries.

Mafuyu's fingers, wrapped around my right hand, confirmed the presence of the non-existing six strings. Taking a cue from the opening G note that had never stopped, Paul McCartney's voice began to extend into the sunset. I could hear nothing, but I knew nonetheless.

Of course, that bird doesn't exist in this country.

The feather that I was holding tightly, that had finally made its way back, would be flying over the oceans once more. Things wouldn't return to the way they used to be.

But even so—

"Hey, Mafuyu."

"..... Yes?"

"Don't ever disappear again."

Mafuyu squeezed my hand in reply.

The illusory six strings disappeared, and the fragments of the song of <Blackbird> that were echoing in my heart scattered into the air.

The flock of birds circled the sky and soared towards a faraway place amidst the remaining sounds. When I turned my head around, I could still see the birds' tiny shadows on the horizon, on that clear divide between the two distinct shades of blue.

Don't turn back, spread your wings and soar away—I prayed. From the warmth that flowed through the tight grip on my hand, I knew Mafuyu was making the same wish as me. We leaned against each other, and watched in silence as our fragments flew past the ocean and away from us.

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